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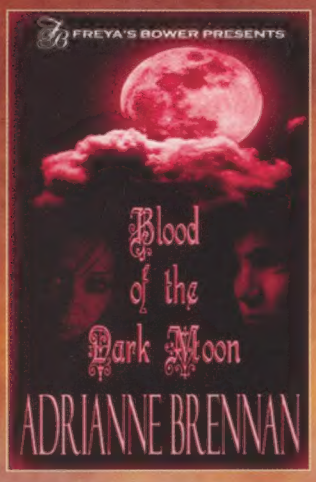

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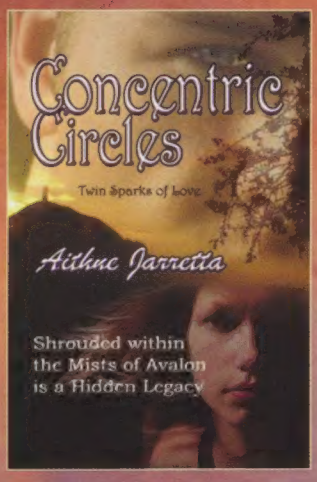

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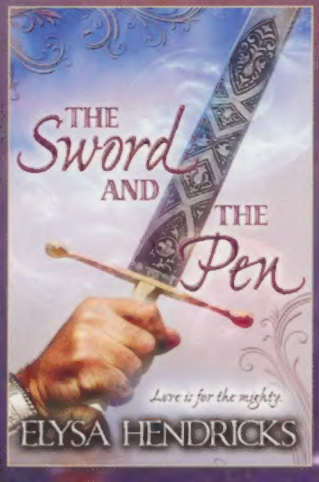

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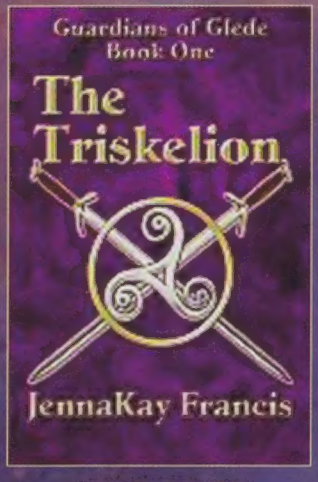

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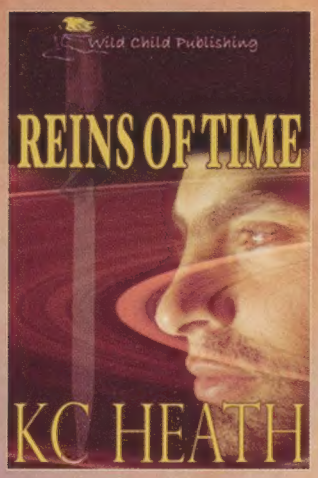

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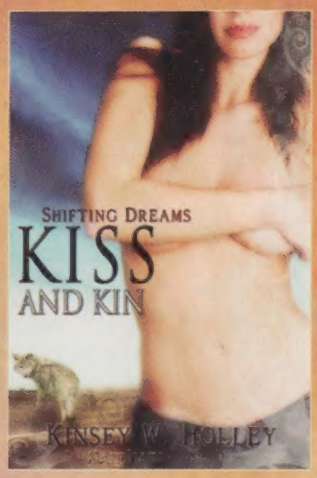

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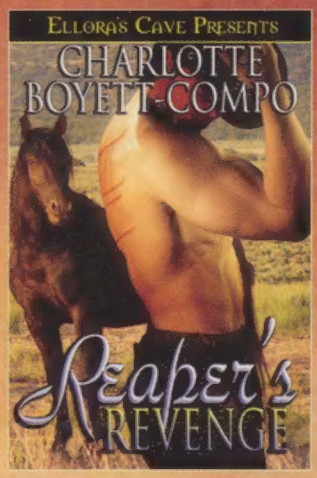

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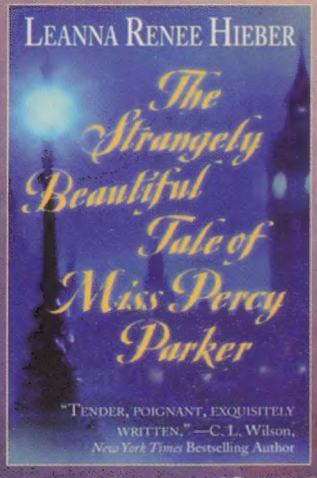
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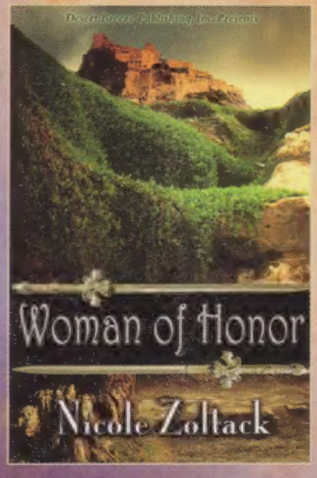

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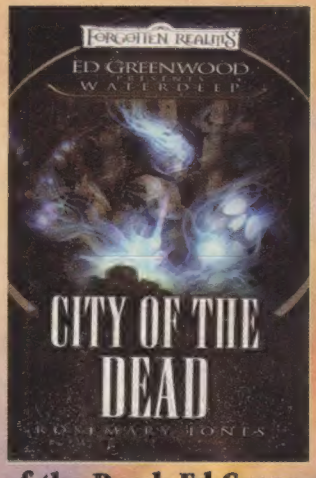

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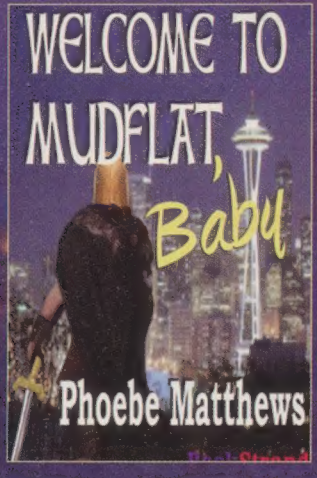

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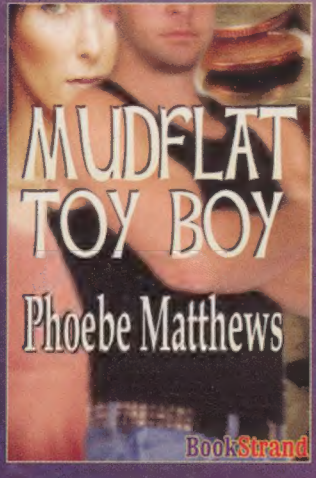

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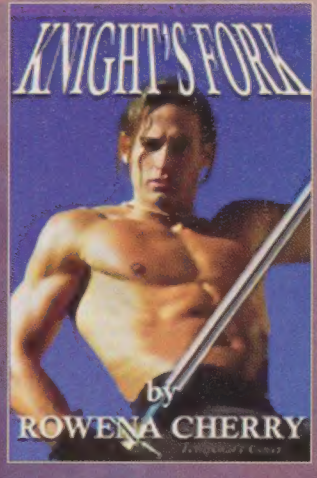

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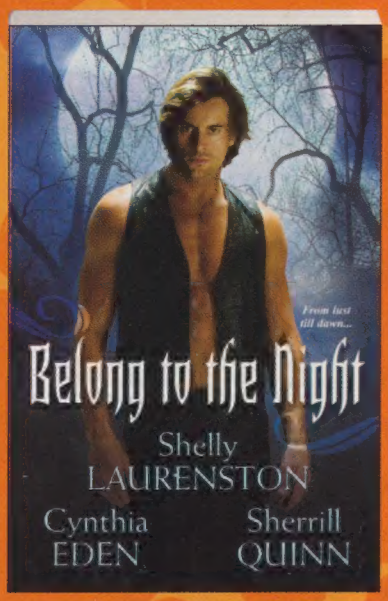

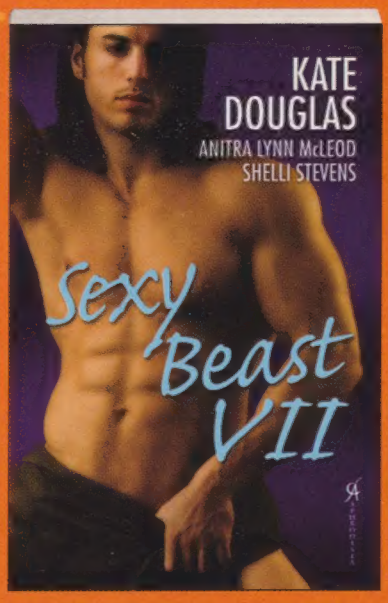

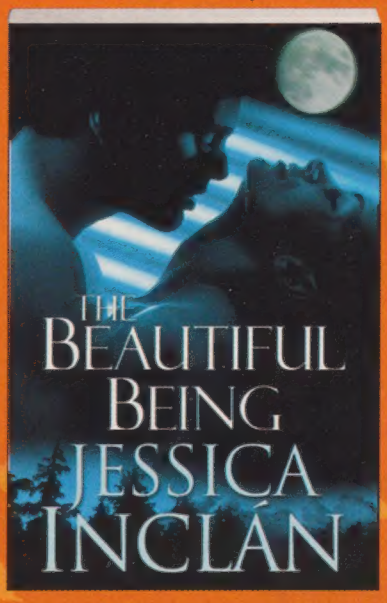

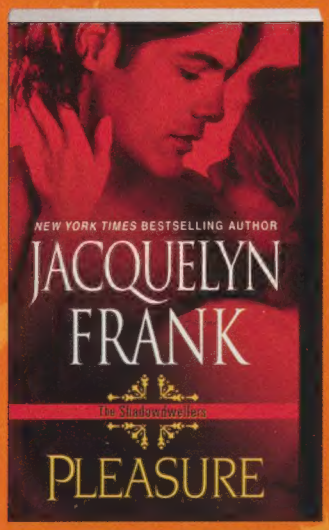

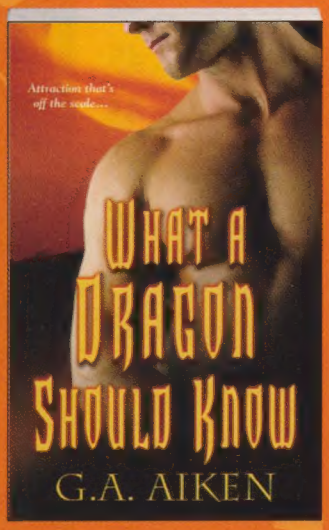

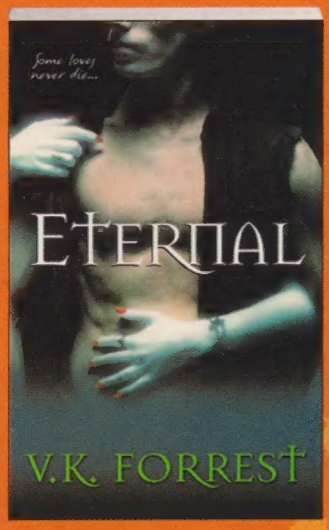

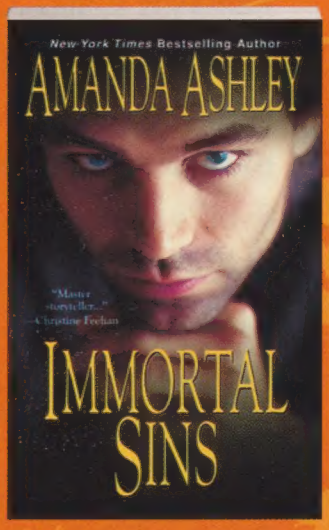

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Volume 15 Number 6

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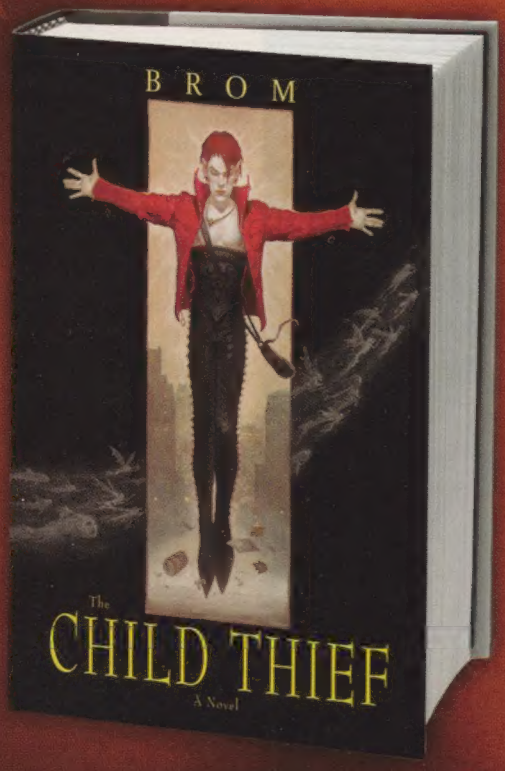

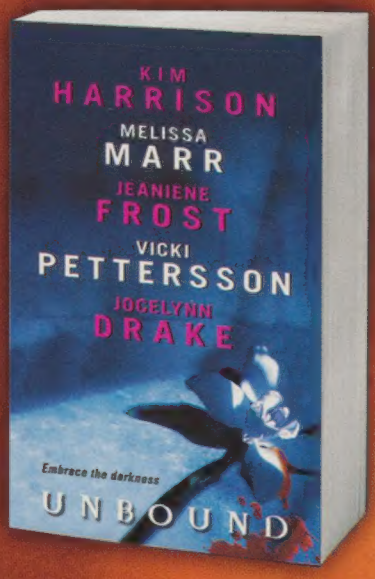

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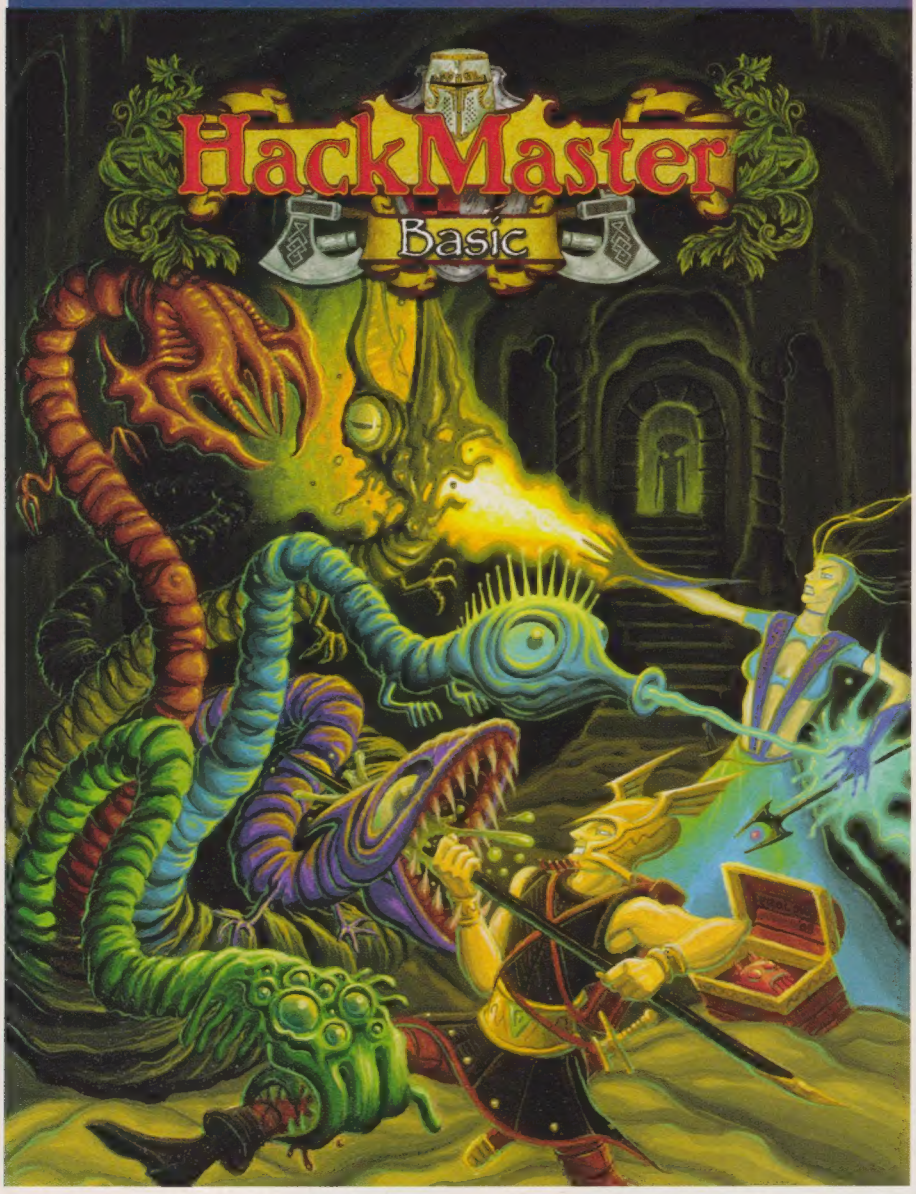

Matt Staggs

***HackMaster Basic*, role-playing game, core rulebook, Kenzer and Company, softcover, 192 pp., $19.99, ISBN: 1-59459-103-2**

HackMaster began as a joke, a fictional game and parody of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* game played by the main characters of *Knights of the Dinner Table*, an ongoing comic that as much satirizes as celebrates gamer culture. In 2001, *Knights of the Dinner Table* publisher Kenzer and Company took the joke to its logical conclusion by releasing *HackMaster 4th Edition*, a hilariously complicated stand-alone game that made its source material look like child's play in comparison. The licensing agreement that allowed the publishers to create a work based on *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* required that a certain degree of satire be present in the finished product, and while *HackMaster 4th Edition* was a playable game, it functioned best as the caricature it was clearly intended to be. In 2007, this licensing agreement came to an end, but rather than discontinue the *HackMaster* line entirely, Kenzer and Company instead chose to re-invent the game from the ground up. *HackMaster Basic* is the first product in this new line. Whereas *HackMaster 4th Edition* reveled in absurdity and complication, *HackMaster Basic* recasts the product line as a more playable game while retaining those original aspects of the system that endeared it to fans in the first place. Artifacts like the game's Honor System, which rewards players who depict their characters in ways true to their alignment and class, and the use of character Building Points to purchase skills and talents, remain intact, as does the tongue-in-cheek tone of the game, with an entire chapter devoted to the proper care and casting of dice being a prominent example. The changes that have occurred between editions have been good ones: the "fire and forget" magic system that was a legacy of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* has been replaced with a new point-based spellcasting system, plus the implementation of a more robust system of combat where defenders roll dice to avoid attack rather than relying on a passive Armor Class score. Another welcome improvement: while *HackMaster 4th Edition* required at least one player to have the *Player's Handbook*, *GameMaster's Guide*, and the eight-volume *HackMaster Hacklopedia of Beasts*, *HackMaster Basic* is a self-contained system that includes rules for character generation, adventuring, plenty of monsters, and lots of magic treasure. If there is a drawback to *HackMaster Basic*, it's the fact that this book is to serve as an introduction to the new *HackMaster* game system and, for now, character creation is limited. Characters may only be one of just four basic classes, fighter, thief, mage, or cleric; four races, human, dwarf, elf, or Halfling; and may only gain five levels of advancement. All of these options are apparently to be expanded in *HackMaster Advanced*, a three-volume set to be released sometime in the coming year. While some gamers may choose to forgo purchasing the basic system and wait instead for the release of *HackMaster Advanced*, *HackMaster Basic* is reasonably priced and, overlooking the lack of class and race options, is otherwise packed with enough content to make it worth purchasing on its own merit.

***Shadows Over Filmland*, role-playing game, sourcebook, *Trail of Cthulhu*, Pelgrane Press, hardcover, 192 pp., $34.95, ISBN: 978-1934859278**

Shadows Over Filmland is a supplement for Pelgrane Press's role-playing game of Lovecraftian horror, *The Trail of Cthulhu*. Taking its cue from classic (and not so classic!) horror films of the 1930s, *Shadows Over Filmland* interprets familiar silver screen tropes from the era in the context of Lovecraft's own cosmic horror. Readers might be inclined to think this is an uneasy or even incompatible mix, but authors Kenneth Hite and Robin D. Laws succeed remarkably in rendering these disparate elements into a cohesive and entertaining hybrid. Laws opens the book with an overview of 1930s horror cinema, discussing its common motifs and antagonists as well as underlying themes: perverted sexuality, loss of identity, and fear of death. He then identifies parallels in Lovecraft's own body of work, illustrating that these two seemingly opposed horror aesthetics—gothic vs. cosmic—have far more in common than a superficial analysis may reveal. This is followed by the introduction of a concept Laws and Hite have dubbed the "Backlot Gothic," a style of play in which the players are thrust into an ambiguously exotic locale, a version of a real-world location that is never fully identified as any one specific place. Examples include jungles, small eastern European countries, and the English moors. Technology in these places might just be a few steps behind the rest of the world, the local people a bit more suspicious and backward, and accents and surnames certainly hint at a proper geographical context, but in a sort of shared suspension of disbelief, nothing is ever confirmed. While this might seem strange at first, this allows the gamemaster and players to step directly into the kinds of settings that studios like Universal trafficked in for years: crumbling castles, gypsy-haunted forests, and "lost worlds" hidden in the depths of impenetrable jungles. The authors then conclude with several pages of character archetypes (gravediggers, local constables, scientists) and descriptions of common settings ready-made to drop into any adventure. The rest of the book is devoted to

adventures proper. The twelve included in *Shadows Over Filmland* pay homage to popular movies like *The Wolfman*, *Dracula*, *The Mummy*, *Frankenstein*, *White Zombie*, *King Kong*, *The Lost World*, and many more, translating their monsters and madmen into proper Lovecraftian tales of forbidden knowledge, secret cults, and indescribable gibbering

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abominations. The final adventure has Hite and Laws engaging in a little meta-story, with players tasked with stopping the production of a Hollywood horror film called *The Call of Cthulhu*. Some of the adventures may be linked together into a single campaign, but they're probably best enjoyed individually as breaks or segues in a traditional campaign. Heavy on atmosphere and content, *Shadows Over Filmland* is a must-buy for *Trail of Cthulhu* gamemasters, and is also recommended for anyone else with an interest in horror role-playing who doesn't mind taking a little extra effort to adapt this to their own favorite gaming system.

***Witch Girls Adventures*, role-playing game, core rulebook, Channel M, softcover, 192 pp., $19.99**

Role-playing games that are suitable for younger children are few and far between, and for whatever reason, games targeted at girls are scarcer still. Enter publisher Channel M, whose new role-playing game *Witch Girls Adventures* is designed with "tweenage" girls in mind. Parents looking for a good game to introduce their daughters to gaming could do far worse than this fast moving, storytelling game of magic and mischief. Players take the roles of young witches-in-training who, in between school, shopping, and their magical training, battle threats both mundane and supernatural. Character creation takes only minutes, with much of the creation process driven by the player's initial choice of a "clique." These are archetypes like the creepy-cool Gothique witches who specialize in necromancy, or the earth-loving Rustics. After choosing a clique, the player determines her skills, talents, and magical abilities, all of which can be improved later through play. The magic system is surprisingly versatile for a game created for young players. Magical spells can be developed on the fly, with the difficulty of a successful casting determined by how far a target is from the caster and other factors. The ambiguities inherent in such a system could be problematic for novice gamers. Fortunately, *Witch Girls Adventures* comes complete with loads of sample spells that should probably cover most situations. The sheer amount of setting information contained in *Witch Girls Adventures* rivals many role-playing products written for adults. The book includes stats for scores of monsters and potential rivals or allies, plus descriptions of sample magic shops, a magical academy, and more. Although the *Witch Girls Adventures* game is based on a comic book series called *Witch Girls Tales*, there's no reason at all why the simple game engine can't be adapted to any setting desired, and knowledge of the comic book series isn't an impediment to enjoying the game. The book even includes some notes on adapting the game for role-playing the adventures of a certain English boy wizard and his friends. In summary, *Witch Girls Adventures* might be a game designed for young girls, but it's fun and versatile enough that older players will find its charms hard to resist.

***Supernatural*, role-playing game, core rulebook, Margaret Weis Productions, hardcover, 244 pp., $44.99, ISBN: 978-1931567497**

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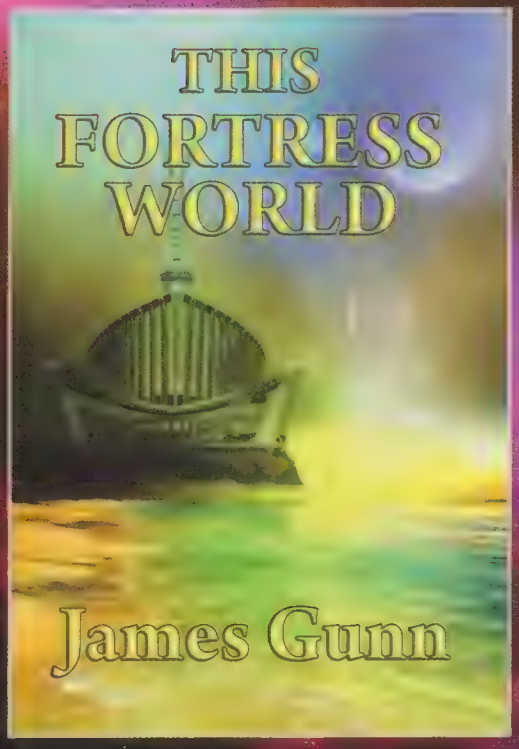

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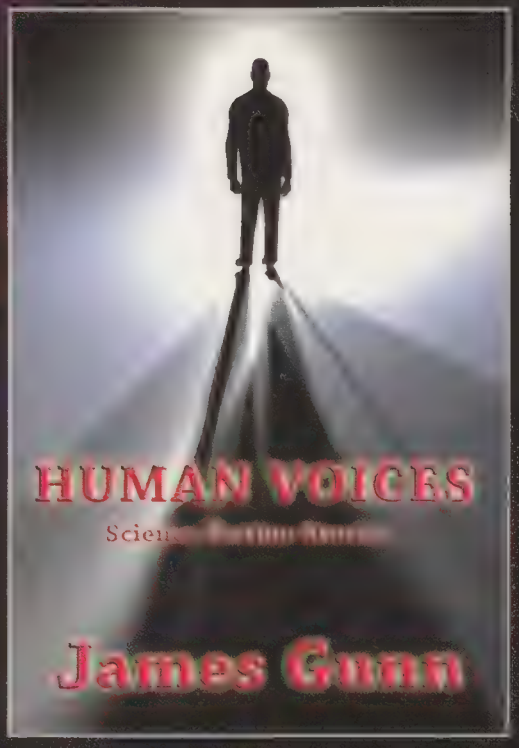

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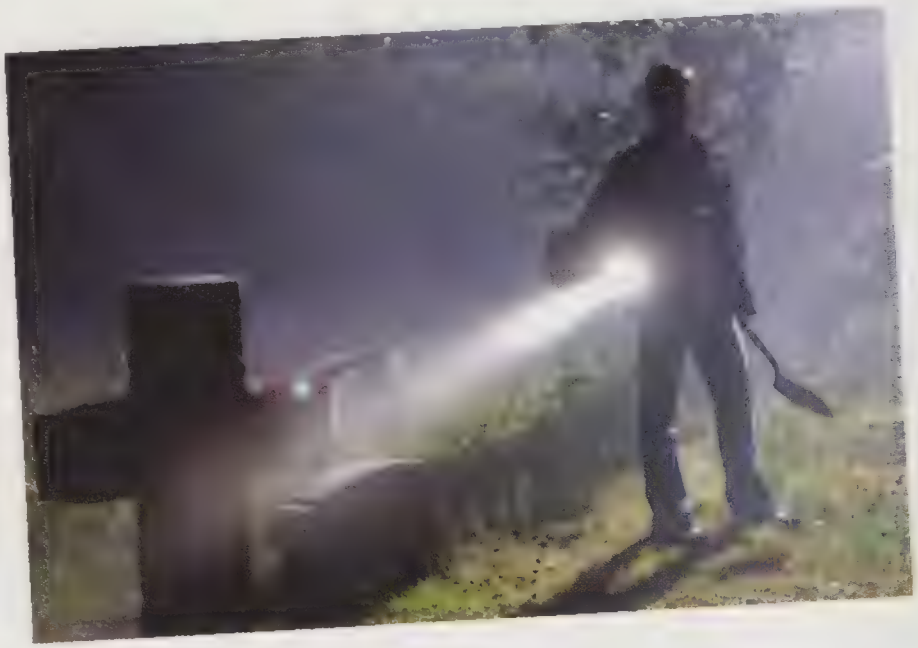
demons, and various paranormal threats. If you think about it for a moment, this isn't very different from most role-playing game campaigns: the player-characters are constantly on the move in search of the next adventure which. more often than not, takes the form of an otherworldly beastie of one sort or another. With this in mind, Margaret Weis Productions' choice to publish a role-playing game based on the *Supernatural* series is pretty much a no-brainer. Margaret Weis Productions is already known for two other games based on popular television programs: *Serenity*, based on the series *Firefly* and the movie of the same name. and the *Battlestar Galactica* role-playing game. All three games use the Margaret Weis Productions house game engine, the Cortex System, for task resolution. Similar in some aspects to Pinnacle Entertainment Group's *Savage Worlds* system, the Cortex System rates all character skills and attributes by dice. A rating of d4 in a skill is very poor, whereas d6 or d8 is fairly average, and d10 or d12 is excellent. Players spend points during character creation to determine the value of the die associated with a particular skill or attribute. Task resolution is simple enough: the gamemaster assigns a target number and the player rolls the die or dice associated with whatever combination of attribute and skill deemed relevant to the task at hand. A sum is generated, and if it meets or exceeds the target number then the action is a success. Learning the system doesn't take very much time at all, and if you've mastered one game that uses it then you've pretty much mastered them all. This can be a great advantage for gaming groups with too little time to devote to learning a new game, but bad news for anyone who isn't fond of the Cortex System. *Supernatural* does a great job of drawing players into the mood of the series, using what looks like news clippings, hastily scribbled field notes, and artists' depictions of monsters to open each chapter. In addition, the rules are written in a kind of rough, irreverent vernacular that makes it sound at times like the book was actually written by one of the show's characters. Speaking of which, all of the major characters are statted and ready for play, including the Winchester brothers, and players have the choice of assuming their roles or generating new hunters of their own. A horror role-playing game isn't complete without a healthy selection of monsters, and *Supernatural* doesn't disappoint: demons, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and even more exotic terrors are detailed, including descriptions of things that may (or may not) destroy them. Especially useful are the "Lore" sections accompanying each monster that provide clues a player may discover during the course of an investigation. Small details like this can take some of the "heavy lifting" out of gamemastering. *Supernatural* is a well-designed and attractive game that accomplishes its goal of bringing players into the world of the hit television series, and even gamers who haven't seen the show might want to give it a try if they're looking for an action-packed, easy-to-learn role-playing game of horror investigation.

***Age of Conan*, board game, Fantasy Flight Games, $79.95.**

Four great empires battle for supremacy in the *Age of Conan* board game, but in addition to matching wits with their rivals, players have to learn to use Conan himself to their advantage—no easy task, as any of the barbarian's vanquished foes would attest. *Age of Conan* earns high marks on presentation: the gameboard is handsomely designed and colored, and the box is filled to the brim with



intricately detailed miniature soldiers, colorful playing cards, and tokens of all sorts. Preparation to play begins with each player choosing one of four Hyborian Age empires: Aquilonia, Stygia, Hyperborea, or Turan, each of which differs in the size of the armies they can initially send into the field, their number of available emissaries, and whether or not they have sorcerous powers at their command. The players are then dealt a number of gold tokens and, if applicable, sorcery tokens, as well as a handful of strategy cards. Players then place their armies in their home kingdoms. One player then places the Conan figure that comes with the game in his home province of Cimmeria and draws four adventure tokens. These determine where Conan will be attempting to travel during the course of the game. Play begins with each player using his or her gold tokens to bid for control of Conan. Whoever wins will be able to direct Conan's movements for that turn, in addition to controlling the actions of their own empire. Sending Conan toward his goal results in the Conan player receiving an adventure token, which can then be traded for gold or sorcery. However, Conan can also be placed in a province that the Conan player is trying to conquer. Doing so gives that player advantages and makes the target province easier to conquer. Conan can also hinder other players. Placing Conan in an unclaimed province makes it more resistant to attack by players not controlling the barbarian. After Conan is moved, one player rolls the Fate Dice and leaves them face-up on the board. The dice allow the players to make certain kinds of action, from sending forth armies to interfering with Conan's current adventure. Players choose one of the dice, perform the desired action, and then remove it from the pool. Thus, actions are reduced as each player takes a turn. Combat and diplomacy actions are resolved by rolling a second set of dice, with bonuses for military actions gained if the player has an appropriate strategy card in his or her hand. Controlled provinces are worth Empire points, ultimately used to determine the winner at the end of the game. The game goes on until either three "ages" of Conan have passed (determined by Conan completing a set number of quests) or whenever a player succeeds in crowning Conan as the ruler of his kingdom, a risky strategy contingent on several prerequisites being met during the course of play. When the game is over, the player with the greatest number of Empire points is the victor. *Age of Conan* is a moderately complicated game that takes several hours to play to completion, depending on the skill of the players, and probably isn't suitable for children or casual adult gamers. Fans of Robert E. Howard's Conan will enjoy immersing themselves in the intrigue and bloodshed of his Hyborian Age, something that this game simulates very well. ☙

Matt Staggs is *Realms of Fantasy*'s games reviewer and also a regular contributor of fiction reviews. When he's not reading, writing or gaming, Matt enjoys spending time with his wife and surfing the web. If you'd like to send Matt a book or game for review, contact him at mattormeg@gmail.com. ☙

Resa Nelson

Typically, sequels tend to get progressively worse until the series quietly dies.

When it comes to horror films, the first movie in a series is often the best because it offers a fresh idea or a new twist, making it feel like something that's never been done before. Typically, sequels tend to get progressively worse until the series quietly dies.

The Final Destination series is the exception to the rule. *Final Destination* (2000) was successful enough to warrant a sequel, *Final Destination 2* (2003), which performed surprisingly better that the first. The real shocker was the success of *Final Destination 3* (2006). Producer Craig Perry (*American Pie*) explains: "New Line ultimately said *Final Destination 3* was the most successful, most profitable, and biggest opening weekend that they had that year [in 2006]."

Final Destination's growing popularity has come about because new fans keep discovering its existence on cable TV, video, and DVD. This begs the question: Will *The Final Destination* (a.k.a. *Final Destination 4*, scheduled for release on August 28 from New Line Cinema) continue the trend and be the most successful Final Destination film to date? Or will it live up to its name?

The series revolves around the premise that everyone has an expiration date. Death has a game plan for each and every person. But if something tampers with that game plan, the Grim Reaper will track down the intended victims who escaped and claim them. In each Final Destination movie, a teenager has a premonition of a disaster that will happen in minutes. That character experiences the premonition as if it's real, snaps out of it, and scrambles to save as many lives as possible. Those who escape begin to die, one by one, under very strange circumstances.

"In as much as anyone tries to explain déjà vu," Perry says, "if you try to explain [the concept], it's endless yammering. We've been a little bit restricted by the rules we put in place in [movies] 1, 2, and 3. By having a fresh set of people coming into this, they don't regurgitate the rules, they just throw out, 'Maybe it's this, maybe it's this.' And then you see the rules come to life in action as opposed to discussion. What we want is for everybody to feel like they might at some point have the kind of premonition that each one of our characters in the four movies has had at the beginning. Because if you make it a rarified thing, then I'm suddenly distanced from that possibility."

In the first three movies, the characters have been mostly high school students. To keep the series fresh, the filmmakers decided to go with a slightly older crowd. "We were looking for people who were teetering on the edge of the rest of their lives," Perry says. "Not kids going to college, because that's another microcosm – that's a small, four-year period. Because when you're about to graduate from college, and you've prepared for what you think life is going to hold for you by virtue of what you've studied or the fact that you don't know what you want to do – it's that expanse in front of you that made us want to cast these people."

Director David Ellis (*Snakes on a Plane*) adds, "We have a young cast that no one knows about – they're all going to be stars. They're really good in the movie. I'm really impressed with their work ethic and their knowledge to get better and better and to try really hard and work to give a good performance. They're good looking, like all young casts are, but they're good actors."

The filmmakers have a habit of hiring young actors who show great promise. Ali Larter (TV's Heroes) and Seann William Scott (*Dude, Where's My Car?)* are the most accomplished to date. They both starred in *Final Destination 1*, and Larter reprised her role in *Final Destination 2*. The latest installment focuses on four friends: Nick (Bobby Campo), Lori (Shantel VanSanten), Janet (Haley Webb), and Hunt (Nick Zano). The story kicks off when the friends go to a stock car race and Nick has a premonition of an accident on the track that sends debris and cars flying into the stands, ultimately ending in horrific disaster. The foursome manages to escape, but their problems have just begun.

Campo says, "Shantel's and my characters are boyfriend and girlfriend."

"It's a story about us four and our friendships and our relationships with one another," says VanSanten, "and that really affects the emotional experience."

Webb adds, "It's definitely an ensemble. There's someone who has the premonition but we're all affected by it. We all come together to try to cheat death."

But how do they feel about getting a big break in the horror genre?

When asked if he likes watching horror films, Campo says, "Absolutely. *28 Days Later* is one of my favorite movies."

VanSanten cringes at his words and says, "Bleah. No way. I don't like scary movies. I always watch them through my hands. I don't deal well with the gore and the scariness. But it's cool in this one, because there's not an ax murderer running after you through the woods or someone hunting you down in your house. It's something that's unseen. It's more like a logical way of dealing with trying to catch death. You have to use your instinct, your intuition, your logic. That really attracted me. And once you see the special effects makeup, you're more intrigued than scared by it. I think maybe now I can go see scary movies – but before now, no way."

Final Destination 4 called for the actors to do many of their own stunts. Normally, stunt work would be enough of a challenge, but how is it compounded when the stunt involves a character's grisly death?

"Now – especially because of some of the stunts we've done – I'm not scared of much," says Webb. "Because you are facing it every day on set when you're in scenes where you're near death. You're faced with it, so it doesn't become as scary but it does make you realize life is precious."

VanSanten explains the actors were given plenty of rehearsal time for stunts, including practice time with stunt doubles. "I never felt like I was in danger. There's always things that could go awry and something that could happen that's beyond their control, but luckily nothing has happened to any of us – minor bumps and bruises that you get walking on the street any day. The adrenaline rush you get from being on set and in those situations is crazy. It's really freaky."

In addition to having his actors do much of their own stunt work, Ellis prefers the real thing instead of CG whenever possible. "I love to do practical action whenever I can," Ellis says. "For *Final Destination 2*, we only had to do the logs that came off the logging truck [in CG] because we wanted them to go in specific places. For *Snakes on a Plane*, the snakes just wouldn't do what I wanted, so we had to have CG snakes. We didn't plan on it. We took 600 snakes up to Canada to shoot, and then they pretty much just wriggled around. It's not like a dog where they're trained to do tricks. On this movie, because we have some big set pieces – we're incorporating things that are collapsing – we're doing CG. But again I love to do practical action when I can, as much as I can. CG is a great tool but I don't like to rely on it, especially in action sequences because I think you get pulled out of the movie when you see Tom Cruise running half a mile down a hallway and a fireball is chasing him – it's not real. I try to incorporate action in my movies that is more reality based."

One of the biggest challenges in making *Final Destination 4* was filming it in 3-D.

"We had looked into doing the third one in 3D. At the time the technology was there to capture it," Perry says. "But there was very limited technology to exhibit it. So it didn't seem to make sense to spend an enormous amount of money capturing something that we couldn't really exploit for many years on end. The challenge is budgeting, finding a way to do 3D, which is not inexpensive to do. It is an enormously expensive technology, much of which has to do with time. Other movies that have not had a successful plan like we have put together, they went way over schedule

in shooting and way over schedule in post production. We took examples of what they experienced and worked with PACE technologies (who have come up with the camera systems), and they came up with a plan that has made us be on time, on budget, on schedule, and we've taken in account some of the challenges of post production. Because when you do a 3D movie, in essence you have two movies that you have to render all of your visual effects twice and then marry them together. So imagine the amount of time you have to do on each shot."

Perry believes that some recent 3-D efforts, such as *Beowulf*, have fallen short of expectations. "The way it was animated, you felt like mannequins were walking around. It was just odd. You're just in a CG world. [In *Final Destination 4*] you feel you're there, and there's an intimacy you get that I think *Beowulf* could never do because of the plasticine nature of the animation and, frankly, a storyline that people avoided reading in high school."

Beyond the horror, there is a softer side to *Final Destination 4*. For many years, filmmakers flocked to Canada because it was cheaper to make movies and TV shows there than in the United States. Locations such as Prague have also been popular with filmmakers looking to stretch their budget dollars and get the biggest bang for the buck. But there are also several states that offer enormous tax incentives to production companies. Ironically, before Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana joined the bandwagon, hoping its temperate climate would attract companies looking for an economical way to make movies. As a result, in the post-

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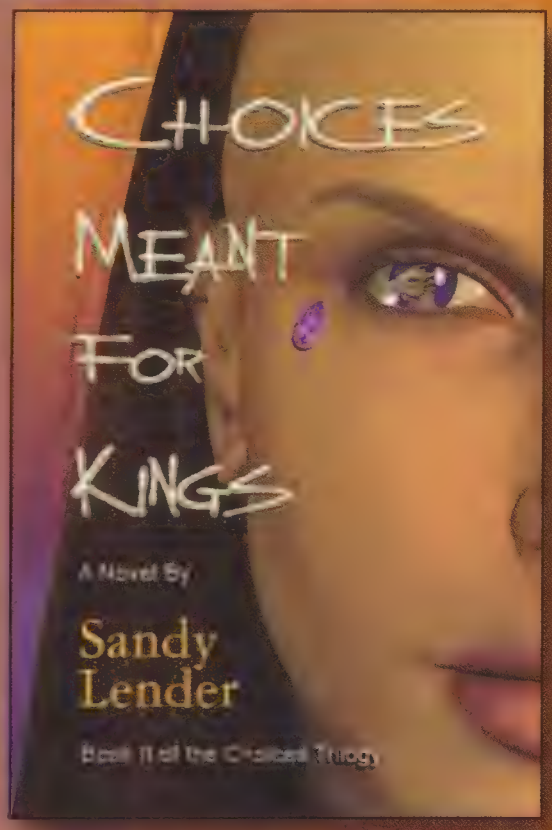

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Katrina years, Hollywood has pumped many, many millions into the state's economy. *Final Destination 4* was filmed in New Orleans, which at that time was supporting so many film projects that the city couldn't accept any new ones.

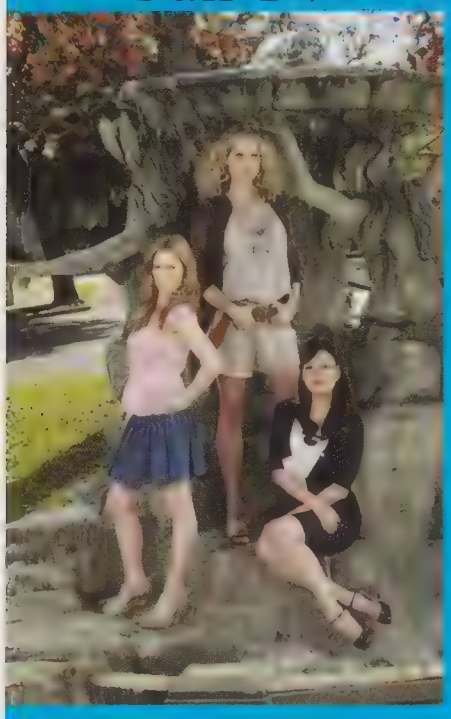
Perry describes the decision to film in New Orleans as "100% economic." He says, "However, what we've discovered in coming down here is that there are great crews. We've had a great time working down here. It's good to be in a community that wants to work, that is looking to have people come in, and that is looking to become a production center in the United States, which I think is something that we, as a country, are lacking right now. The incentives certainly help. Let's be honest – it's Hollywood. It's about economics. But there is a community here that really wants to live up to that economic opportunity and create a center for film that everyone can come to in the United States."

While the motive may have been strictly business, the impact on New Orleans is heartfelt by its natives, especially those hired to work on *Final Destination 4*. While filming in May 2008, a drive into the city from the airport revealed a glimpse of post-Katrina life. On one hand, road crews were busy working to improve a major highway. On the other hand, rows of FEMA trailers still being used as homes stood a stone's throw from the highway being revitalized. On set, dozens of locals showed up to work as extras in one of the major disaster scenes that takes place in a movie theater near the end of the film. Much of the crew was made up of Louisiana residents, including the local caterer who served up native dishes throughout the day. One of the drivers hired to cart journalists to and from the set described how working for movies such as *Final Destination 4* made it possible for her to rebuild her life by earning the money she needed to repair the damage to her house, remove her family from a FEMA trailer, and move back home.

"I had my choice of taking this film to a lot of places – every place that's offering the tax incentives in the U.S.," Ellis says. "We looked at Connecticut and New Mexico. When we saw that we could get what we wanted here and that we could get the crews that we wanted here, I just felt that it was good karma to bring our money here, because these people need it. We've been able to employ so many people. From not only our initial crew to all the restaurants that everyone is going to and dry cleaners and whatever. All the money that we're putting back into the economy I think is a really, really good thing because these people have had a tough time."

Resa Nelson has been the TV/Movie columnist for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine since 1999. She is a SFWA member and a Clarion graduate. Her first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword* (published by Mundania Press), was a Finalist for the 2009 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy Novel and is the first novel in her Dragonslayer series. Her next novel is a standalone novel: *Our Lady of the Absolute* is scheduled for publication in mid-2010. Nelson's short fiction has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, *Fantasy*, *MZB's Sword and Sorceress XXIII*, and other magazines and anthologies. Visit her website and blog at www.resanelson.com.

Fall TV



During troubled times – when the nation is at war or the economy is weak – it's common for people to escape through entertainment. In other words, these are the times when fantasy thrives. This fall, ABC is banking on that fact by launching three new fantasy projects followed by a science fiction horror series later in the season, while other networks take a more cautious approach.

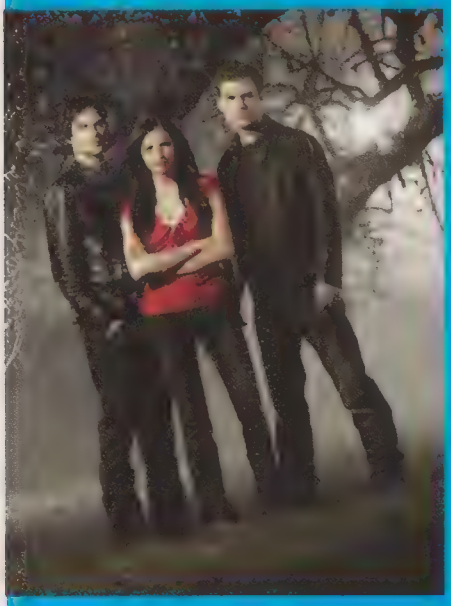
The most promising new series is *Eastwick* (ABC), based on John Updike's novel, *The Witches of Eastwick*, as well as the 1987 movie starring Jack Nicholson. Described as a cross between Desp*erate Housewives* and *Charmed*, the series is set in the fictional New England seaside village of Eastwick. Initially, the three main characters – an eccentric artist, a mom, and a local reporter – have negative opinions of each other. But once they get acquainted, they form a tight bond of friendship. That bond is tested and strengthened when a mysterious man arrives in town and tries to seduce all of them. At the same time, his presence frees the supernatural powers that none of the women realized they had. Rebecca Romijn (the X-Men movies) stars as Roxie the artist.

Flash Forward (ABC) begins when a mysterious event causes everyone on the planet to lose consciousness at the same time for a few minutes. As a result, everyone catches a quick look at what will happen six months in the future. But that "flash forward" is different for each person because it's personal. Joseph Fiennes (*Shakespeare in Love*) plays Los Angeles FBI agent Mark Benford, who is determined to get to the bottom of the strange event and what the premonitions mean. His team creates an enormous

database of these premonitions, called The Mosaic Collective, hoping to figure out why everyone has foreseen a tiny piece of the future.

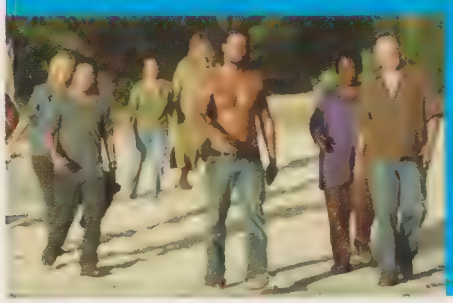
The *Vampire Diaries* (CW) is based on the series of novels by L. J. Smith, telling the story of a teenage girl and her

brother (in the aftermath of their parents' death), their friends, and the vampire classmate they meet in school. Set in Mystic Falls, Virginia, two vampire brothers face off at opposite ends of the spectrum: one brother is a good vampire trying to do the right thing, and the other brother embraces his own evil nature. At stake are the lives of the teenagers, their friends, their families, and the town of



Mystic Falls.

Prep and Landing (ABC) is an animated Disney special due to air during the holiday season. Dave Foley (*TV's News Radio*) voices the character of Wayne, an elf who has worked diligently for the past 227 years for an elite unit known as Prep and Landing, whose mission involves using high tech to pave the way for Santa and his reindeer on Christmas Eve. After so many years of loyal service to the unit, Wayne expects to be promoted to Director of Naughty List Intelligence, and he's devastated when he's partnered with a rookie elf instead. On Christmas Eve, Wayne and his rookie partner encounter unexpected

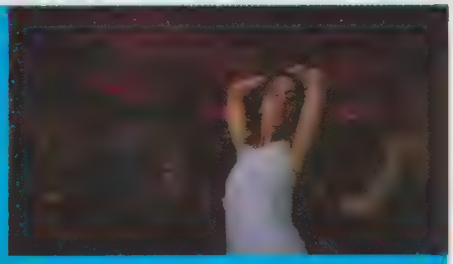


problems, including a huge snowstorm that threatens to halt Santa in his tracks.

Later in the season, ABC plans to unveil *V*, a re-imagining of the science fiction thriller mini-series that aired in the 1980s. "V" stands for "Visitor," the term for aliens who promise they've come in peace and bear gifts of medical

cures and technological advances for the human race. In reality, they're manipulating human beings and are up to no good. Spaceships hover over every major city across the planet, and the aliens promise they'll do no harm. But one woman discovers they're infiltrating governments and businesses, as well as manipulating thousands of teenagers to spy for them. Scott Peters, the Emmy-nominated creator of *The 4400*, is the executive producer.

Joss Whedon fans can breathe a sigh of relief: *Dollhouse* (FOX) returns for a second season. "We think we can grow the show," says Fox Entertainment Chairman Peter Rice. "The show



became much stronger creatively during the course of the season. Joss feels very energized about it, and we believe in him as a creator. We feel he can build the show and grow in the new season and that Friday is a good place for it to do that."

Fringe (FOX) has been given the green light for a second season, too. According to ifmagazine.com, co-creator J.J. Abrams said, "In the story of Fringe, it is the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. The first year was about learning there is an enemy and I would say that Season 2 is about knowing the enemy. As the show progresses, and in the second season, it's building to a specific confrontation and a really interesting shift in the fundamental paradigm on the show in a very cool way."

Other returning series include *Medium* (now on CBS), *Heroes* (NBC), *Ghost Whisperer* (CBS), *Supernatural* (CW), and *Smallville* (CW). The final season of *Lost* (ABC) is slated to begin in early 2010. ☙

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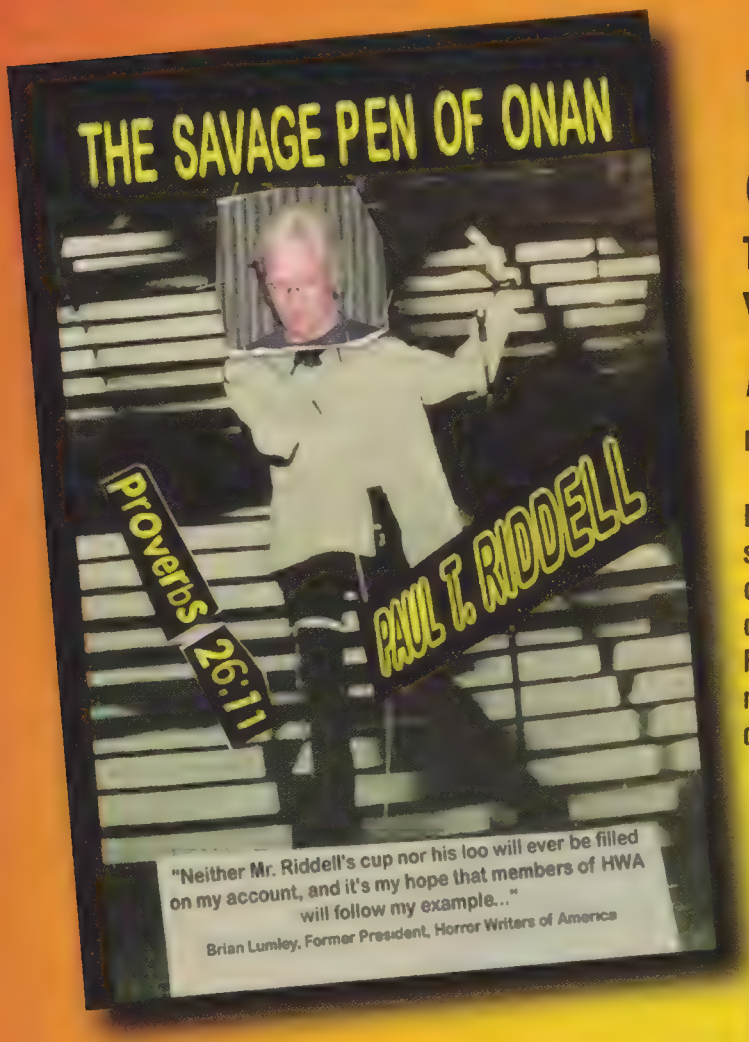
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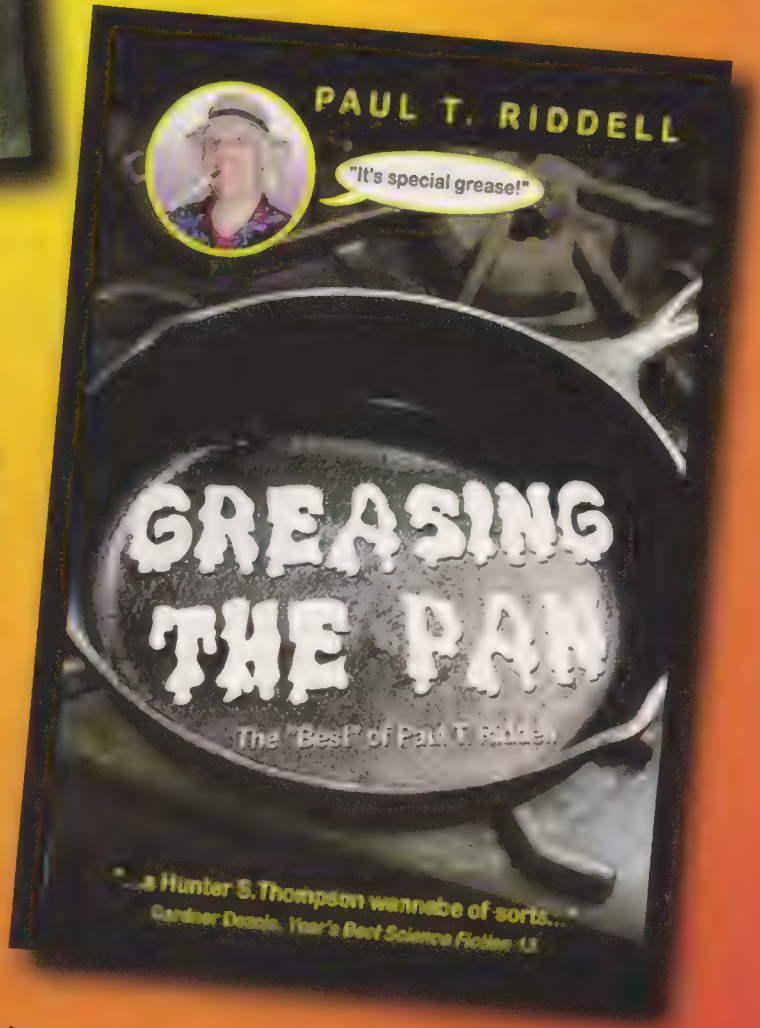
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by H. Talat Halman

al-Khidr rescues and protects people in times of danger and distress.

Who is al-Khidr, the Green Man? Many call him *Nabi Khidr*, the "Prophet al-Khidr." Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan called him "the guiding angel of all seeking souls." (Inayat Khan: 1927, 105) Among the most famous "seeking souls" al-Khidr guided are Alexander and Moses. What did they learn in their journeys with him?

The story of the Green Man al-Khidr stands at the physical center of the text of the Qur'an. Both the Qur'an and oral traditions (*hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad relate that Moses journeyed with the enigmatic al-Khidr as his guide and companion. And the Persian Alexander Romances (*Iskandarnama*) present al-Khidr as Alexander's deputy and cook and explain how he became immortal by drinking the water of eternal life. Thus in Islamic lore, al-Khidr, like Elijah, Enoch, and Jesus, ranks as an immortal. Though his name may be spelled and pronounced in different ways—al-Khadir, al-Khidr, al-Khizr (Arabic), al-Khezr (Farsi), Hızır (Turkish), or Khidlir and Khizir (Indonesian)—all these names mean, in the original Arabic, "the Green."

Why is he called "the Green"? The Prophet Muhammad explained that after al-Khidr would sit on barren land, the ground would turn verdant with vegetation. The places where al-Khidr taught and the truth he transmitted were vividly "green," and alive. Similarly, John Matthews describes the Green Man as "the spirit of nature, an ancient symbol of nature and fertility." Matthews compares him to the Norse World Tree Yggdrasil (Matthews: 2002, 7, 8), the King of the Wood, and the May King and Harvest King. (Matthews: 26)

Al-Khidr protects a treasure and a birthright that mystical Muslims, the Sufis, realize as the treasure of *gnosis* within the heart. A Sufi proverb relates that everyone will meet al-Khidr at least once in his lifetime. The Sufis say you will know him when you shake hands with a white-bearded man with no bone in his thumb. In hagiographies of Sufi saints, al-Khidr confers an initiation, often by conferring a mantle. Sometimes al-Khidr's initiations take the form of a special litany or prayer. The son of the great Sufi poet Rumi wrote that Rumi's transformative relationship with Shams-i Tabrizi was like that between Moses and al-Khidr.

In folklore, al-Khidr rescues and protects people in times of danger and distress. It is said he saves the pure in heart from theft, drowning, snakes, and scorpions. Portraits by Indian artists show al-Khidr traveling on top of a large fish, evoking the image of Vishnu's first avatar, Matsya, the fish who saved the first man, Manu. (Dalrymple 1993: 300) In one story from Turkey, an old white-bearded man hails a tourist bus and asks the driver to wait while he goes to bring his grandchild. Minutes pass and the old man does not return. Finally, frustrated, a passenger approaches the driver to ask him to drive on. But when he touches him, he discovers the driver has died in his seat. The passengers then realize that the old man was al-Khidr who had intervened to save them from dying at the hands of a driver fated to die himself.

The Story of the Journey of Moses with the Green Man

The core of al-Khidr's persona comes to us from the Qur'an: One day Moses walked with Joshua and vowed that he would seek "the meeting of the two seas" even if it took ages (some Qur'an commentators identify the meeting of the two seas as the water of life which flows from a spring in the Garden of Eden). The Prophet Muhammad explains that God had instructed Moses to seek out al-Khidr at this convergence after Moses had foolishly claimed to be the wisest man on Earth. As they journeyed, Moses and Joshua rested on a rock. Suddenly, the fish they had brought as food slipped out of their basket, but only Joshua, not Moses, saw this. As they ventured on into the night, Moses said to Joshua, "Let's eat the fish we brought." Then Joshua said, "Didn't you see? Oh none but Satan could have made me forget to tell you! While we rested on the rock, the fish zoomed away miraculously." So Moses answered, "That is where we have to retrace our steps."

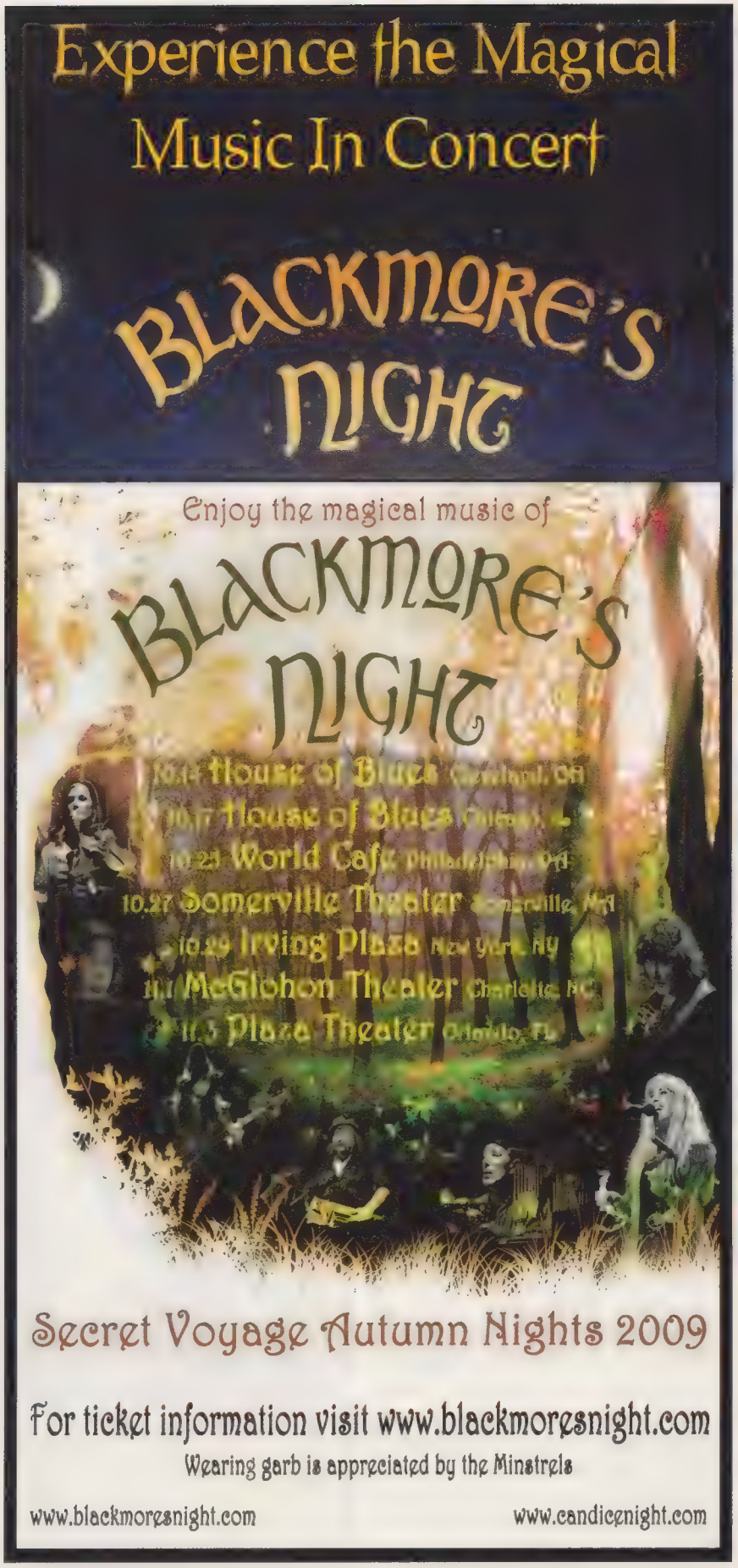
When Moses approached the rock, he saw standing there one of God's most pure and illustrious servants, to whom God had directly imparted mercy and inner

wisdom. Moses asked this man, al-Khidr, "May I follow you so I may gain some of your guidance?" Al-Khidr answered, "How do you expect to understand what is beyond your comprehension? If you follow me, you must agree to the condition that you ask no questions until I permit you to do so." Moses said, "God willing, I will restrain myself and obey."

So al-Khidr and Moses journeyed and came upon ferrymen who greeted them with peace and seemed to be al-Khidr's friends. As al-Khidr and Moses were sailing, Moses noticed that al-Khidr was gouging a hole in the hull of the boat. Immediately Moses exclaimed, "That's a terrible thing to do! Are you trying to drown innocent people?" And al-Khidr said to Moses, "I warned you, you wouldn't have patience to bear with what I would do." Moses replied, "Please forgive me for speaking out and don't make it harder for me by reminding me." So they continued and al-Khidr saw some young boys playing. He stepped forward and killed one of the boys. Moses protested, "That's a terrible thing to do! Why did you kill an innocent soul?" Again al-Khidr reminded Moses that he'd agreed not to ask until al-Khidr permitted. This time Moses said, "If I speak out again, I'll understand if you decide to part company with me." They continued on and entered a village where no one offered them any hospitality—neither food nor drink. At the edge of the village they came upon a wall dilapidated and on the verge of ruin. Al-Khidr quickly built the wall back up. Moses asked, "What are you doing? You're entitled to wages for your work."

Al-Khidr now said, "This is the parting between me and you, but before I go I will tell you the inner meaning of these events that you didn't have the patience to bear. In the case of the boat, these were poor people who worked their trade on the river. Coming up from behind them was an evil king who was seizing all boats in good condition to use in battle. I desired that their boat should be spared by slightly damaging it.

"In the case of the boy, his parents were faithful people and he was growing up to be tyrannical, arrogant, and rebellious. Since your Lord and I feared that he would corrupt the faith of his parents, we decided that he should be replaced by a



child better in purity and mercy. In the case of the wall, a righteous man had left buried under it a treasure which was the inheritance for his two orphan boys to claim. Your Lord desired that they should grow old enough and strong enough to retrieve their treasure; and it is a mercy from your Lord. I did none of these things of my own accord. And that is the inner meaning of the events that you lacked the patience to bear." (Qur'an 18.60-82)

Al-Khidr as the Guide and Cook to Alexander the Great

A second thread of al-Khidr's persona comes from the Persian Alexander Romances. In the early centuries of the Common Era, the Alexander Romance was one of the most popular cycles of stories in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. In these legends, Alexander was not only a warrior, but also a wise sage and an emperor. Alexander's legends became part of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim lore.

Alexander's search for the water of life led him to a kingdom whose fruits were exquisite and whose people generously shared with each other. The people of this kingdom dug their own graves near their doors in order to be mindful of their own mortality. (Becker: 1973) When Alexander inquired about this, they explained that their religion was the worship of the one God. Alexander asked, "Who taught you this religion and this truth?" As soon as they said, "A man called al-Khidr," al-Khidr appeared. When he heard that Alexander sought the water of life, he insisted on leading Alexander and his army into the land of darkness to find the water

So Alexander traveled into the land of darkness. Led by al-Khidr, they advanced until they could no longer distinguish day from night. One dark day, al-Khidr dropped something, and reaching for it, his hand touched water that tasted as sweet as honey. He knew he had found the water of eternal life and went to tell Alexander. But when al-Khidr returned with Alexander, they found that the spring had disappeared. Alexander was heartbroken. After seven fruitless days of waiting, they advanced, trudging over gravel which no one realized was in fact a bed of precious gems. Later all came to regret not having scooped up these gems laying everywhere at their feet. This symbolism echoes the Hermetic notion that the philosopher's stone (*lapis philosophorum*) is distributed everywhere like salt.

By tasting the water, al-Khidr became immortal. But Alexander once again faced his mortality and found his immortality project dashed. (Becker 1973) Illustrators of the Persian Alexander Romance often paint the scene of al-Khidr at the water of life with Elijah by his side. Like Elijah, also a protector of travelers, al-Khidr makes his appearances to guide people in danger and initiate people whose hearts are open or souls advanced. Al-Khidr often plays the *deus ex machina* who appears out of nowhere to rescue people in crises, only to disappear as mysteriously as he appeared. (Southgate: 1966)

Al-Khidr and Elijah

Jewish traditions tell a story of Elijah that echoes the story of al-Khidr and Moses. The great Qabbalist Yehoshua ben Levi asks Elijah to guide him on a journey to unveil the secrets of God's justice. Elijah finally agrees but stipulates that Yehoshua must remain silent until Elijah permits him to speak. The morning after a family hosts the two travelers, Yehoshua hears Elijah pray for their cow to die. And it does. A wealthy man offers no hospitality and Elijah rebuilds his wall. When at a rich synagogue they are offered only bread and salt, Elijah wishes aloud that they should be given many chiefs. When a poor community hosts them, Elijah asks God that they only be given one chief. Elijah explains to Yehoshua ben Levi who had not been able to stay silent: (1) the cow was substituted for the wife who had been destined to die; (2) under the wall was a treasure that the man. because of his stinginess, did not deserve; (3) a place with many chiefs is bound to be ruined; and (4) those under one chief can prosper. The moral of this story is given as follows: If the wicked prosper it is to their disadvantage; when a righteous person is distressed or tried s/he is being delivered from a worse ordeal.

Al-Khidr and the Green Man

Since al-Khidr's name means "the Green," how does he fit in among other forms of the "Green Man"? Throughout the world, stone images of the Green Man grace household gardens, homes, and churches. Many medieval cathedrals have featured faces framed with foliage: these are the faces of the Green Man. Mayday celebrations feature Jack-in-the-Green, as well as the green May King and May Queen. There are "green" saints: St. George and St. Michael. The Hindu avatar Rama is green. The Tibetan yogi Milarepa trained under Marpa who treated Milarepa harshly to purge his negative karma for having used sorcery to effect a murder. Milarepa turned green by eating mostly nettles.

In the Arthurian cycle, Sir Gawain is initiated by the Green Knight. (Stone: 1959) The persona and actions of the Green Knight, as Brian Stone describes them, echo in some ways the stages of al-Khidr's persona and acts:

Thus, on his first appearance he is described successively as a terrifying giant (ll. 137-40), a handsome and well-built knight (ll. 141-6), a weirdly green—and hence, implicitly supernatural—person (ll. 147-50). And on his last appearance, besides all these, he appears as a warm and sympathetic human being (ll. 2333-6), an omniscient confessor who judges with accuracy and compassion, and above all with authority (ll. 2338-99), and finally as a human, subtly diminished by the termination of his supernatural function. (Stone 1959, 116)

Like Sir Gawain's Green Knight, al-Khidr's character is vitriolic both in the vernacular sense and in the alchemical sense of transformative turns and twists. Not only is al-Khidr the embodiment of green and verdancy, he is also the archetype of the spiritual guide among

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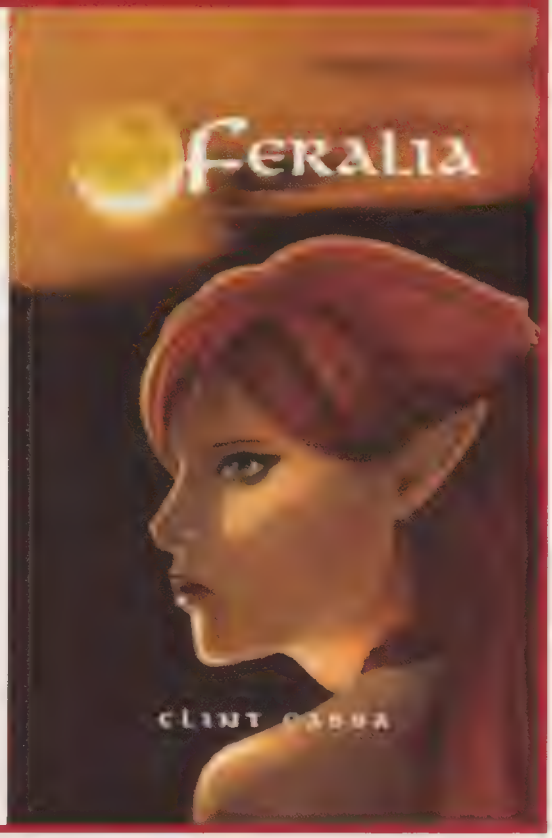

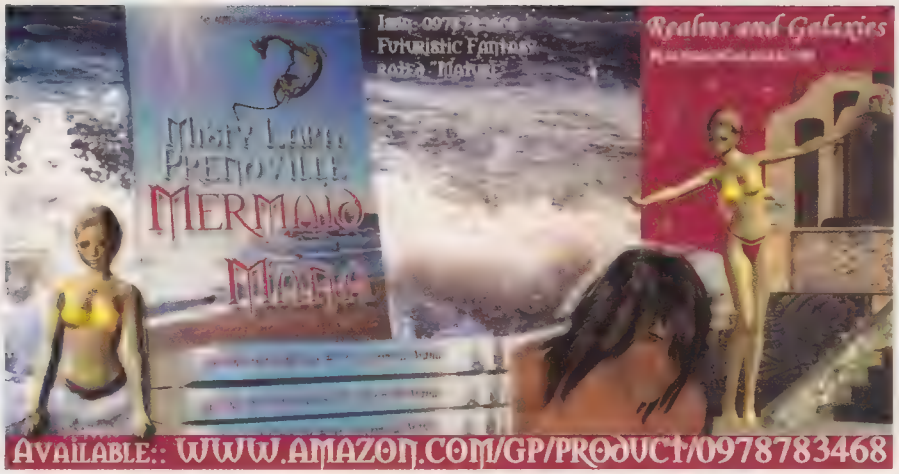

Sufis.

Like al-Khidr, the green-skinned sage Yoda trains *Star Wars*'s warrior Luke Skywalker. As in the Qur'anic narrative, Yoda challenges Luke's aptitude and preparedness for Jedi knight training. In a martial arts film co-written by Bruce Lee and released under the titles *The Silent Flute* and *Circle of Iron*, the story of Moses' journey with al-Khidr is transposed to a martial arts setting. Here the Moses figure is a naturally talented fighter, Cord the Seeker, who wishes to be trained by the great blind kung-fu master (played by David Carradine). Their journey unfolds closely evoking the narrative in the Qur'an.

In *The Green Man,* William Anderson identifies stories of "Green Men" from a wide range of periods, places, and cultures, including Osiris, Attis, Adonis, Dionysius, and Robin Hood. Like both the Egyptian Osiris and Utnapishtim of the Gilgamesh epic, al-Khidr stands where waters grant eternal life. Utnapishtim, who dwelt "at the two rivers", instructed Gilgamesh how to dive for the plant of immortality, "Never-grows-old", at the bottom of the sea. Utnapishtim, whose name is usually translated as "He who saw life," "came to possess everlasting life" when after the Flood, the god Enlil blessed him and his wife and placed them "in the distance at the mouth of two rivers."

Al-Khidr, Alchemy, and Psychology

Al-Khidr mastered the ability to find the elixir of life in the land of darkness. The elixir and the precious gems were the secret gleanings of the land of darkness, the alchemical *nigredo*. Green is also a color central to Hermes Trismegistus, who imparted (and concealed) the mystery of immortality in both the Emerald Tablet and the Grail Cup (*Krater*) in chapter four of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. (Copenhaver: 1992, 15)

Jung in his main essay on al-Khidr writes:

Anyone who gets into that cave [the cave of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, a story also related in the Qur'an's eightrrnth chapter], that is to say into that cave which everyone has within himself, or into the darkness that lies behind consciousness, will find himself involved in an—at first—unconscious process of *transformation*. By penetrating into the unconscious he makes a *connection with his unconscious contents*. This may result in a *momentous change in personality* in the positive or negative sense. The transformation is often interpreted as a *prolongation of the natural span of life or as an earnest of immortality*. The former is the case with many alchemists, notably Paracelsus (in his treatise *De vita longa*), and the latter is exemplified in the Eleusinian mysteries. (Jung: 1993)

Here is the great lesson in this story for our souls: the elixir and the gems are in the darkness. The energy of the shadow, the places we cannot see in our inner journey, is the creative, volatile, and valuable energy. It is at this point that Alexander proceeds west to the place where the sun sets in the spring, a sea of mud, empowered with God's promise that Alexander may chastise or bless them with goodness. (Qur'an 18.86)

In Jung's terms, Moses is the ego and al-Khidr is the unconscious, a vast ocean into which the "fish" (i.e. the al-Khidric dimension of Moses' consciousness) disappeared and reappeared again at that rock—the *lapis*. In that transformation, Moses had new access to the endless oceanic wisdom called, as Semnani liked to put it, the "al-Khidr of your being." (Corbin: 1969: 61)

In the image of al-Khidr's knowledge as "water," we experience the fact that this flowing reality cannot be "set in stone," as we often speak of written words. Immortality and eternal youth cannot be rigid as stone. The elixir of which al-Khidr partakes and shares gave immortality to Moses and Alexander. We receive that gift of immortality not in a physical way, but in our collective spiritual, symbolic, and cultural memory. (Becker 1973) The contemporary Sufi master Sherif Baba has described the journey that Moses and al-Khidr take as our own journey: our unconscious, symbolized by the cooked fish, is awakened through the rejuvenating waters of divine love and thus achieves a higher consciousness represented by al-Khidr. In this way, al-Khidr is the spiritual God-friend who re-creates people through the power of intensive relationship and connection. And in so relating, Khidr brings out of us the child of our being, a verdant soul. (Catalkaya: 2005)

Al-Khidr and Nature

In the same way that trees give off oxygen, al-Khidr gives off an inspiration of inner knowledge that bears new fruits of wisdom and discernment. As plants turn sunlight into food, so we receive from al-Khidr the light of the eternal garden, transformed into our experience. Al-Khidr's knowledge is imparted in the way flowers favor the air with their fragrance: the bestowal is unseen but felt and known. Al-Khidr represents this renewal of spirit and respect for the earth and creatures. As Rabbi Kook said of the vegetable world, "Every part of the vegetable world is singing a song and breaking forth a secret of the divine mystery." (Besserman: 1994, 2) That reality is al-Khidr

Al-Khidr's authority is natural: like nature, he is green and renews his greenness. That Al-Khidr is green is both a literal and a metaphoric statement. He is fresh, abundant, stunning, and unpredictable. Al-Khidr doesn't depend on linear hierarchies; he

branches out in multiple directions. And like nature, al-Khidr's lessons include the natural disasters we do not understand: the storms, volcanoes, and earthquakes we cannot or do not want to explain. People of Moses' time lacked the idiom we use now: al-Khidr teaches "outside the box." As various hadith attest, it was when Moses thought he had it all figured out that God sent him to go study with al-Khidr.

Al-Khidr and Transforming Possibilities

Al-Khidr's authority is natural, not institutional or hierarchical. What al-Khidr imparts is renewal and rejuvenation. Henri Corbin has reflected that, while al-Khidr is associated with nature's greenness, we should not interpret him as only another vegetation myth. (Corbin 1969: 56) The discovery of al-Khidr's secret points not to something already there in nature, but to a discovery of what can be created, of what we can do next, of an ultimately alchemical transformation. For example, in 2004 when the tsunami hit Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia, the question for most people in its midst was not, "Why did this happen?" but rather, "What can we do now?" "How can we make life better?" "What's

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possible?" That's why in the story of al-Khidr in the Qur'an, his relationship with nature differs from that of other Green Men such as Adonis or Attis or Osiris. Al-Khidr represents much more than the mystery—as profound and beautiful as it is—of the dying and resurrecting god. Al-Khidr represents a further horizon: nature's transformational possibility. Al-Khidr's actions do more than justify themselves: they open up new roads, new destinies, new possibilities. Al-Khidr imparts lessons in transformation and mediates the experience of death and the possibility of attaining immortality. Further, the story of al-Khidr and Moses models the master-disciple relationship. And the story of al-Khidr and Moses whispers some of the mysteries of predestination and theodicy if we can listen.

Nature is not merely a sentimentally beautiful experience; it offers not only soft sweet beauty but also commanding, awesome, and overwhelming majesty. Al-Khidr reminds us of this in the way he embodies nature and initiates us into its presence. In a recorded talk, the late Sufi master Pir Vilayat vividly described al-Khidr's natural initiations:

> And the Al-Khidr of your soul puts you through terrible tests, puts you through a quagmire of iniquities so you may come out unscathed, puts you through the test of drowning, through the test of fire, through the test of air, and finally through the test of truth.

Here is the initiation of "acts of God." the overwhelming tsunamis, the raging forest fires, the winds of hurricanes, and all of the stark reality such traumas transition us into.

In the story in the Qur'an, al-Khidr practices nature's qualities of breaking down, killing, and rebuilding to give birth to transformations leading to new fates and new fortunes. Hazrat Inayat Khan quotes a Persian couplet that expresses this: "It is the gardener who knows which plant to rear and which to cut down." (Inayat Khan, *The Message*)

Like nature, al-Khidr is active, dynamic, and alchemical. Al-Khidr is also, as the *Alexander Romance* hints, like a fire. Al-Khidr has passed through the alchemical stages of *nigredo, albedo,* and *rubedo*. He has manifested and integrated the elements and energies of earth, water, air, and fire.

Al-Khidr and the Alchemy of the Alexander Romance

Al-Khidr taught and guided two warriors, conquerors, and rulers; his persona and knowledge are powerful, not romantic. The green principle that the Prophet ascribed to al-Khidr appears in the Qur'an in Sura Ya Sin as the "green wood from which fire will start." (36.83) So it is no surprise that in the Alexander Romance, al-Khidr carries the fire used for cooking, which symbolically combines the vitality of his verdancy with the vigor of his transforming quality and the nature of his authority. Al-Khidr was free of darkness because he carried the fire on which Alexander and his armies depended.

Al-Khidr shows us we must care for nature because—among so many reasons—what Hazrat Inayat Khan calls the "sacred manuscript of nature" is the intimate scripture that inspires fresh, new, "green," experience for our spirit, soul, and body. How might we understand such experience? It rises before us like a dawn sun. Just as Alexander traveled through a cosmic day from sunset to sunrise, our path is the vast journey. This journey is the greatest rite of passage, a transforming act carrying us to the place where two seas meet. And this journey is the greatest "passage" to read for we are

called to read nature more deeply than words can carry back to us:

> And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
> Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stone, and good in everything.
> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, scene 1

Al-Khidr in Voltaire

Voltaire, perhaps inspired by the story of al-Khidr, recounts near the end of *Candide* a story that hints at al-Khidr's thread of theodicy. In Istanbul, the interlocutor Pangloss encounters "a very famous dervish who was esteemed the best philosopher in all of Turkey." Pangloss asks him "why so strange an animal as man was made." The dervish answers, "Why meddlest thou? Is it thy business?" When Pangloss protests against the evil in the world, the dervish answers, "What signifies it, whether there be evil or good? When his highness sends a ship to Egypt, does he trouble his head whether the mice on board?" Asked what one should do, the dervish answers, "Hold your tongue." When Pangloss asks to discuss a variety of philosophical themes, the dervish slams the door in his face. (Voltaire, 85-86) Here Voltaire's portrait of a dervish evokes al-Khidr's ruthless compassion. Like al-Khidr, ethical questions posed at a discursive level of knowledge are trumped by a higher perspective that is born of the spiritual work of training in silence, restraint, and patience.

Al-Khidr in the Poetry of Goethe and Whitman

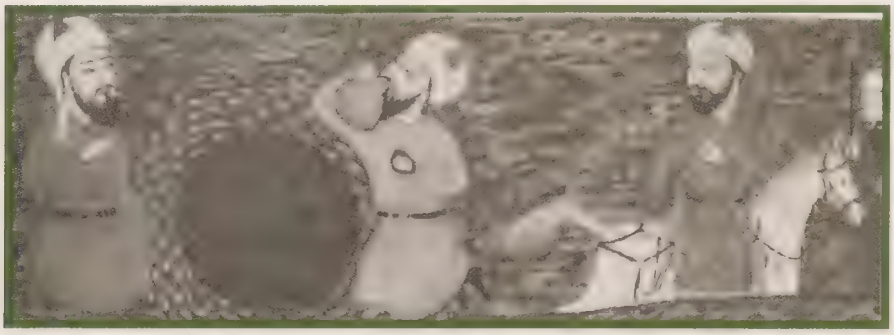
Goethe expressed his desire to seek rejuvenation in the East at the spring of al-Khidr, invoking al-Khidr's waters of eternal life:

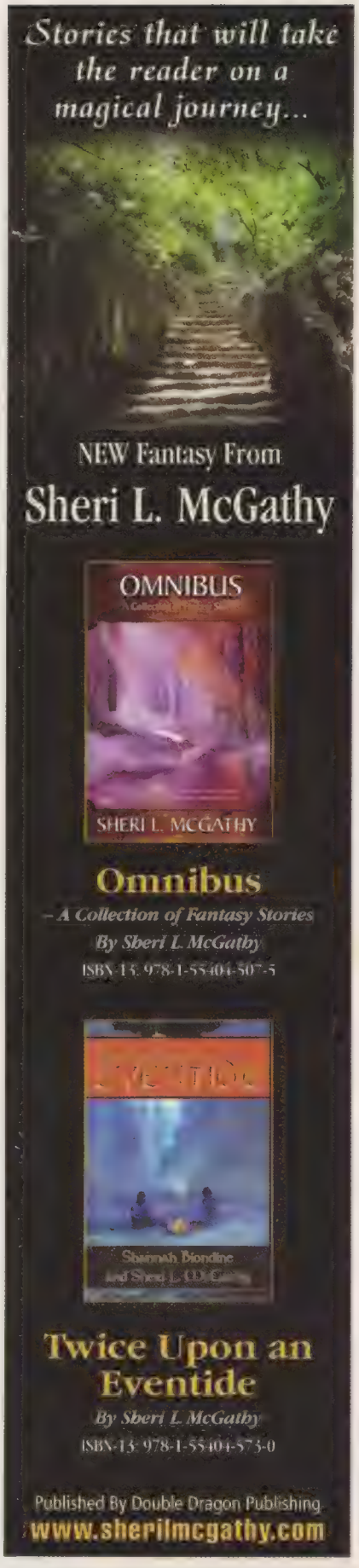
> North and South and West are crumbling,
> Thrones are falling, kingdoms trembling:
> Come flee away to purer East,
> There on patriarch's air to feast,
> There with love and drink and song
> Khiser's spring shall make thee young. (Goethe, 199-200)

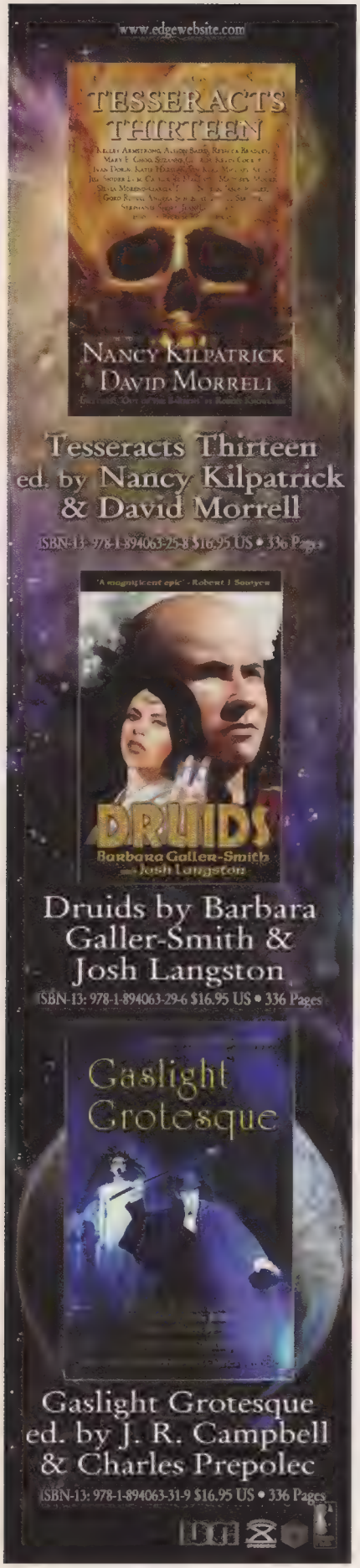
Among the Bläketashi Darwishes, a group of Western Sufi poets, one suggested the incarnation of al-Khidr is the poet of *Leaves of Grass,* Walt Whitman, who wrote in his poem "A Persian Lesson":

> For his o'erarching and last lesson the greybeard sufi,
> In the fresh scent of the open air,
> On the slope of a teeming Persian rose-garden,
> Under an ancient chestnut-tree wide spreading its branches,
> Spoke to the young priests and students.
> "Finally my children, to envelop each word, each part of the rest,
> Allah is all, all, all—is immanent in every life and object…"

Journeying with al-Khidr, Moses and Alexander each followed a guide who knew the secrets of nature, its growth, and its renewal. So now, as we work with love to keep our Earth alive and green, we might hear the call to join the journey with al-Khidr that Moses and Alexander have made. Al-Khidr the Islamic Green Man has reached across time and space (as we would expect an immortal to do) to participate in the worlds of Moses, Alexander, Alchemy, Sufism, and Whitman.







Al-Khidr, Elijah, and Saint George

But al-Khidr also belongs to the salt-of-the-earth folk who revere him and respect him as they do Elijah and St. George. Indeed, throughout the Levant, many shrines are multiply dedicated to al-Khidr, Elijah, and St. George. For example, at the same shrine in Beit Jala near Bethlehem, Christians will venerate St. George, next to Jews who venerate Elijah, next to Muslims who venerate al-Khidr. (Dalrymple: 1997, 339) In Anatolia, a fertility festival named for both al-Khidr and Elijah, called Hidrellez, is celebrated on May 5th and 6th. In this way, al-Khidr serves as a symbol of the rejuvenation of hope and peace in the Middle East as well as a living icon of our relationship to nature. As a green man, he reminds us of the mysteries of Mother Nature. And as an immortal, he opens up questions about our human nature and serves as the muse to the mysteries.

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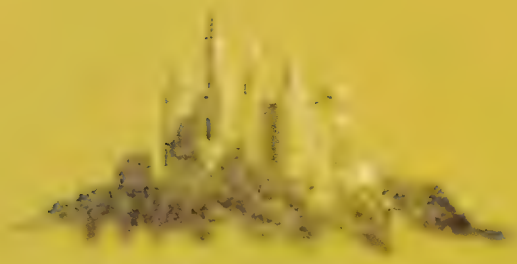

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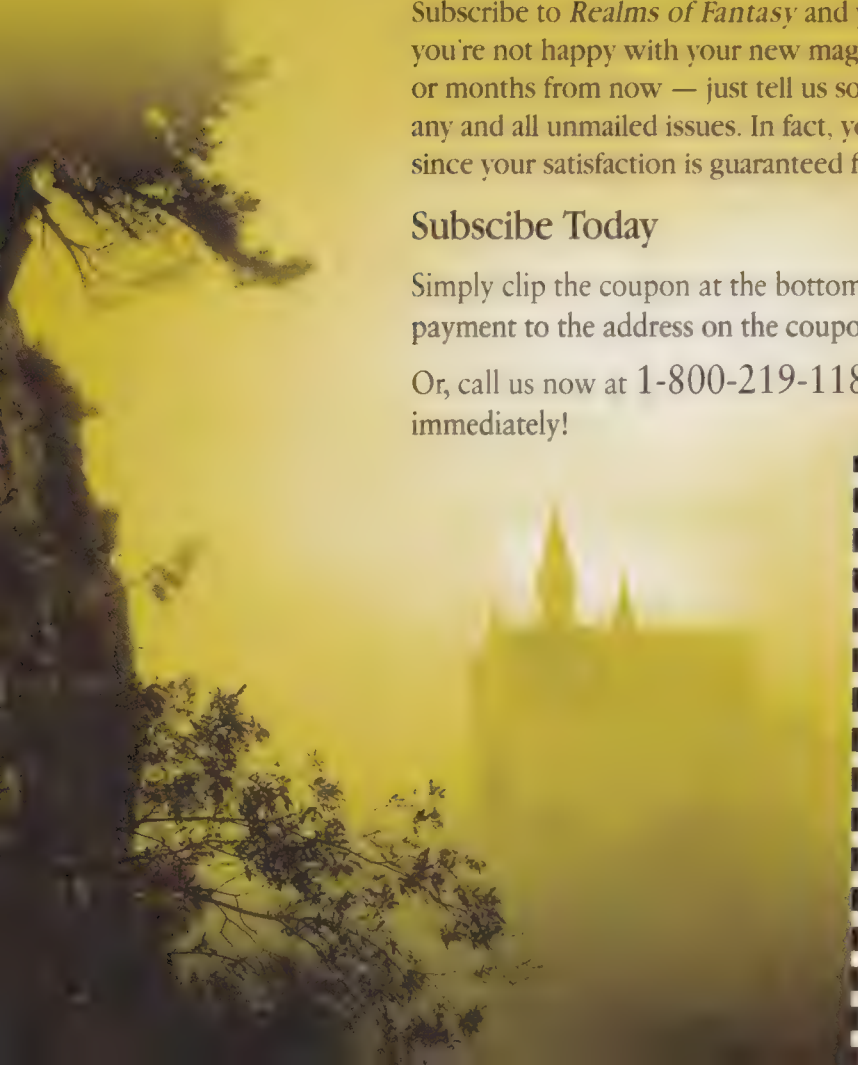

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Beauty and power together make a formidable package. Sometimes, however, the package contains a gift.

Flower Fairies

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Illustrated by Michael Hague

She stands behind the bouquet of flowers, her little face barely visible through the green fronds. Her skin is the color of loam, her eyes the faded green of underwater seaweed, and her lips the dusky rose of the tulips that hide her.

My heart pounds. I see her among all the bouquets set on the long white table, but my colleagues don't. They're moving flowers, checking tags, figuring out which bouquet goes into what memorial chapel.

We have four funerals this afternoon and two viewings tonight. The funeral home is large, modern, with several exits and entrances, so none of the groups will see each other. Their music shouldn't even overlap.

On days like today—a Saturday, shortly after the winter holidays—I employ nearly a dozen people, some of whom just stand by the doors and make sure the right family goes to the right memorial chapel.

It's all very delicate and very sad, and I try very hard to make sure that my employees seem sympathetic. After hundreds of funerals, however, many people lose sympathy. They recognize the patterns and realize some people are loved, some are hated, and some are simply forgotten.

And then there are the very old, whose friends and family have died long ago.

The very old touch me. I can easily see myself as part of their ranks, alone and forgotten. I want someone to honor me when I die, just as I'm sure they wanted someone to honor them.

So I do. For their funerals, I put on my best dress, and sit in the chapels myself. The ceremony is often elaborate, planned for friends and family who are now gone. When that happens, it's clear the person never expected to live so long. Often she (and it usually is a she) planned her ceremony with my father or my grandfather.

We keep amazing records. My family has planned funerals for this town for more than a century. If a historian comes into our little parlor and asks to see the records from a burial sixty years before, I can find it. I can tell who presided and who attended.

I can also tell what kind of floral arrangements decorated the memorial chapel.

Flowers have always been my specialty.

Perhaps that's why I notice the flower fairies long before anyone else does.

This little girl looks no more than three, but looks can be deceptive, particularly among flower fairies. Three is a problem. Three means I might have to return her to her family.

When she realizes that I see her, she smiles. Her eyes brighten to emerald and actually twinkle.

She touches the flowers in front of her. Ferns accent a mix of dusty rose and purplish blue tulips, with a single well-placed lily in the center.

"I made this," she says in a decidedly childlike voice.

Everyone in the room turns. The silence, which was already heavy, turns oppressive.

She doesn't seem to notice. She's smiling at me. She is as young as I feared.

"Isn't it pretty?" she asks.

I turn to my assistant Diane. Diane's skin is normally the color of chalk, but it's gone even paler now.

"Call Roderick," I say.

Roderick is the only one of the flower fairies who uses modern technology. He burns through cell phones like smokers burn through matches. Fortunately, he's smart enough to keep the same number with each phone change.

Diane slips out of the room. Technology usually doesn't work well in the presence of the magical.

My watch stopped every single time I went into the clearing.

I smile at the little girl. "Your flowers are lovely."

"Thank you," she says primly. Then she waits. She wants me to ask what it is she's doing here or, worse, what she wants.

I never ask the flower fairies what they want. That's the wrong question. It's a question—particularly with a magical child—that could get the questioner in decades of trouble.

"Is this your first bouquet?" I ask, not really wanting to hear the answer.

She nods. "Can I stay?"

I don't dare say no to her. Saying no to an infant flower fairy is much more dangerous than saying no to an adult.

"You can stay," I say and try not to cringe.

I was little more than a babe myself when I first met the flower fairies. My parents owned a summer cabin near one of the mountain lakes. It was the only place I'd lived that didn't smell faintly of formaldehyde.

Instead, it smelled of the cool, clear lake water—and flowers.

Flowers. Flowers everywhere. My father believed that the cabin's previous owners had planted thousands of perennials, not listening to my mother when she would remark that many of the flowers that covered our property every year were annuals. Not only that, but they often bloomed at the same time—peonies and geraniums, roses and lilacs, asters and snowdrops. Seasons seemed to mean nothing on our land, something I didn't appreciate until much later.

I must have been six when I stumbled onto the clearing. In those days, children—even young children—were allowed to wander so long as they came back in time for supper. I wore a watch with large hands. I'd learned to tell time two years before, and I adhered to the schedule rigidly.

The schedule gave me freedom, which I desperately needed. When you grew up above a funeral home, you knew more about sadness, mourning, and death than you should have. The entire house had an oppressive air—one I accepted as normal until I grew old enough to visit my friends.

Sunlight filtered through the trees, burning off the last of the early morning fog. That fog made everything seem opaque—the trees, tall and strong with their green leaves; the shadows, deep and dark and somehow welcoming; and the flowers, which covered the meadow like grass.

The colors would have been overwhelming but for the fog: blues and reds and pinks and so very much white that it looked less like an accent color and more like a deliberate shade.

I stepped from my path in the trees, expecting to walk on a carpet of flowers, because that was what they looked like, a carpet that led to another part of the woods.

But I sank into them. The ground where the flowers grew was lower than the ground in the forest. I walked in a sea of blooms, shoulder-high, and I felt like I had found heaven.

My watch stopped and I was late for lunch, forbidden to go off on my own again for a week. By the time I returned, the flowers were taller, and I didn't like walking inside of their stalks. The darkness with its intermittent rays of sunlight frightened me—and even then, I knew there was something wrong here, something not completely normal.

But I visited the clearing every summer. I learned to remove my watch before I stepped inside, because it stopped every single time I went into the clearing.

But I was never late to lunch again—the fairies saw to that. For such capricious little creatures, they have oddly tender hearts.

We have six memorial chapels—two large, three medium, and one small, so that the family doesn't notice that the deceased has few friends. This afternoon's funerals will take place in both large chapels as well as two of the medium chapels.

We'll have crowds.

But the little girl's flowers aren't going to any of those chapels. They're going to the small chapel, on the far side of the building.

At six tonight, we're holding a viewing.

I don't expect anyone to come.

The deceased is Helena Spenser, one of the very old. The obituary that ran in the paper this morning said she was one hundred and five, but the age was just an estimate. Like so many of her generation, she was born at home and no one ever issued a birth certificate.

And like so many women before her, Helena Spenser often lied about her age.

I met Helena a decade ago, when she made her funeral plans. She was formidable, a woman who still had vestiges of unusual height. She carried herself like a dancer, back straight, moving with fluid grace.

I even remember the outfit she wore—a black dress trimmed with red, and decorated with a single rose in the dress's lapel. Her hat, a cloche which matched the dress in design and trim, tilted rakishly on her thick silver hair.

My office was small then; I hadn't yet built the new Memorial Center. We sat in what had once been the servants' quarters in my family's oversized Victorian and, heads bowed, decided how Helena Spenser's friends and family would celebrate her long life upon this Earth.

Only this morning's obituary warned me that Helena

Spenser's family had died sixty years before in a devastating fire. Her close friends—a group of widowed women who had raised hell and money for our little town—died nearly two decades ago.

She had acquaintances, but not the kind that most older folk had. She had never left the home she built after her husband and sons died, so she had no retirement center bridge partners, no orderlies who cajoled her to eat, no nursing home directors who felt it their duty to attend the funeral of one of the "members." She never went to church, so no minister would feel obligated to say a few words about her passing.

While she'd been spectacular in life—an actress who became a playwright, a self-made woman who had somehow survived the loss of everyone who mattered to her when she was still in her forties, the center of society into her seventies, and a philanthropist until the day she died—she kept to herself.

There was to be no ceremony. I remembered that much without even checking her file.

Such nonsense, she'd said when I broached the topic all those years ago. *Show the world I'm dead and then burn what's left.*

I hadn't known about the fire then. I hadn't known about it until this morning when I read about her.

I'd known the obituary was coming; I'd called the paper myself to make sure I didn't have to fund a notice of the viewing from Helena Spenser's account. But I hadn't expected the obituary to be so detailed and rich, nor had I expected Helena Spenser's life to be so fascinating.

Although I probably should have.

I had only met her the once, and she'd made quite an impression on me.

We have no other flowers for Helena Spenser's viewing, and that angers me. This woman gave millions in charity, and no organization that benefited from her benevolence thought to send a single memorial.

Granted, most people send flowers to funerals and Helena is only having a viewing. And in the middle of this morning's obituary, the paper had highlighted a box of memorials where money could be sent in lieu of flowers.

I understand charitable donations. I usually encourage them. But someone should remember this woman as she leaves this life to go to the next. Someone should decorate her chapel, just for a little while.

Looks like that someone will have to be me.

Each funeral has excess flowers. The family takes the cards and the bouquets that they want—if any—and then one of my employees discreetly asks if the family minds donating the remaining flowers to lonely nursing home and hospital patients.

Of course the family doesn't mind. The family doesn't want to think about the flowers because that's just one more thing to worry about.

Besides, flowers die too—and that's an often too visual reminder of the fact that their loved one has just left the world.

So I will take some leftover flowers and decorate Helena's chapel.

It became Helena's chapel this morning, when we moved

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her body from the embalming chamber to the casket and then moved the casket to the front of the room. The casket is polished lavender—not quite the model she picked out (that one has been discontinued) but close enough.

She looks lovely inside of it, nestled on satin that matches her hair. We didn't have to put much makeup on her. She doesn't look that much different from the woman who visited me in my office all those years ago.

She's wearing a black suit with purple piping. The black sets off her hair, the purple accents the casket itself. It's too bad no one will see this. Rarely has our staff made a corpse look so good.

I check on her before the first funeral. I put the guest book near the entrance, so people can sign in and leave if they want to. I place the placard announcing the visiting hours just outside the door.

Right now, Helena looks lonely in her small chapel, without flowers and without notes. The piped-in music—all 1920s jazz—sounds a little too jaunty for the occasion. But I didn't pick it. She did.

She had planned everything down to the last detail.

Except, of course, the effects of age and time.

By late afternoon, Roderick still hasn't arrived. I've had Diane page him three more times. I even sent one of the lowliest assistants to the edge of the clearing not far from the old Victorian. This assistant will stand near the old-growth tree stumps that dot the back of my property, and call for Roderick.

Roderick never comes when he's paged like that. Instead, he finds me, wherever I am, and reminds me he's not a dog.

Of course, this time, the verbal page isn't working either.

I can't wait. I have to ready the chapel just in case someone shows up for Helena's viewing.

Gingerly, I carry the little girl's bouquet into the chapel. The vase is made of obsidian. I've never seen anything so beautifully carved.

The flower fairy sits on the edge of the vase, her feet dangling off the side. Her little fingers caress the ferns. Her emerald eyes twinkle.

"Will everyone like the flowers?" she asks.

I can't answer that question. If I say yes and no one does, then I have lied to a flower fairy, which puts me at their mercy. If I hedge and say, *I hope so*, then I am insulting the little being who created this arrangement, because I'm telling her in a sideways fashion that the flowers aren't good enough. If I say *I don't know*, I lose standing with the flower fairies.

Instead, I stop outside the chapel doors. I look down the private hallway and make sure we're alone.

"Are you sure you want to remain with the bouquet?" I ask.

She nods. She's tiny and delicate and amazingly beautiful. She looks like a flower herself.

"These flowers are for grieving," I say.

"I know," she says. "That's why there's a lily."

The funeral flower, apparently, for flower fairies as well as for humans.

"All right," I say, and with one hand, pull open the heavy oak door leading into the chapel.

No matter how gently we perfume the air, the scents of death and formaldehyde linger. The body in the coffin never looks real. I am always amazed at how many people say that the deceased looks so happy or so alive or so beautiful.

Helena does look beautiful—for a wax doll—but the vibrant demanding woman I met the day we planned this event was much more beautiful. Animation, personality, that spark of life—it can't be faked, not with makeup and reconstruction and excellent posing.

It can only be mimicked.

I expect the flower fairy to gasp or be shocked. But she rides on her vase like a soldier going to battle. She does look up front as we walk. A small frown crosses her little face.

"Pretty," she says, and points.

At first, I think she's pointing at Helena. Then I realize she's pointing at the coffin.

"I want the flowers there," she says, still pointing.

I follow the point as best I can. I swallow, trying to think of a tactful way to tell her the arrangement is too small for such a large empty space.

"Usually," I say, "something as pretty as your arrangement goes on the shelf just behind the coffin."

I indicate the shelf near the podium. Usually three of the loveliest arrangements go there. But a single arrangement, particularly one this beautiful, would look spectacular there as well.

"No," she says and moves her finger up and down imperiously. "There."

She means the closed half of the coffin. I suppress a sigh and silently wish for Roderick.

Of course, he doesn't come.

"The viewing doesn't start until six," I say. "It's four now."

I'm not sure she understands. I'm trying to tell her, in a

Roderick never comes when he's paged like that. Instead, he finds me, wherever I am, and reminds me he's not a dog.

Even in death, she looks mean. Her mouth is pinched from smoking, her fleshy cheeks forming jowls that we couldn't erase with makeup.

roundabout way, that she'll be alone. I don't dare say that bluntly because I'm afraid she'll use her budding magic to force me to stay or to bring in my assistants.

Or worse, to bring in everyone from one of the nearby services.

"It's all right," she says.

And I hope it is.

"I have some errands," I say. "I'll be back before the viewing starts."

"I know," she says, and settles behind the fronds.

For the next hour, I try not to think of her alone in there. She's young, and if young fairies are anything like young humans, then she must be bored.

If she's bored, she'll either sleep or she'll cause trouble.

I'm hoping for sleep, but part of me expects the worst.

After I leave her, I text Roderick. A plume of smoke rises from my Blackberry, so I know the text has gone through. I set it on vibrate and put it in my pocket.

Then I go to the largest chapel, where the final funeral is just ending.

The funeral is for the mayor's mother-in-law. She was a difficult woman, who never had a kind word to say about anyone, her son-in-law in particular.

The large crowd isn't here for her. They're here to see and be seen. It's funeral as political event. The mayor will be running for governor next fall, and, unless something goes wrong, he'll win. Everyone wants to be his friend, in whatever way they can accomplish that.

His wife is the only one crying. She's not sobbing. Instead, her eyes are leaking. She keeps wiping the tears away as if they anger her.

They probably do. No one should cry for the woman in the casket. Even in death, she looks mean. Her mouth is pinched from smoking, her fleshy cheeks forming jowls that we couldn't erase with makeup. She died of a massive heart attack while berating the head of the town council, and the joke around town (spoken quietly and away from the mayor's hearing) was that she had done the impossible: having a heart attack without having a heart.

The mayor is saying a few words. They're deft—he is truly a politician—and then he'll invite everyone forward to pay their last respects.

He has promised me all of the flowers—his wife wants none of them. I slip away, leaving the remainder of the ceremony to my able assistants, who can better stomach hypocrisy than I can.

Instead, I head back to my office, checking my Blackberry as I go.

It's not like the flower fairies to leave one of their children alone for so long. It's not like Roderick to ignore my pleas for assistance.

We've known each other since my days in the woods, back when I was a child. Roderick took care of me and his price (fairies always have a price) was to learn how to use modern technology.

Roderick wanted to cross between his world and ours. Mostly he manages it. People do notice him, but they think it's because they find him attractive. Somehow they miss the glamour that slides off him like glitter.

I'm about to text him again, when Diane catches my arm. I didn't even see her approach.

"You need to come with me," she says.

She was assigned to our other large funeral of the day, but that ended hours ago. I expect her to lead me to the big chapel. Instead, she takes me to the smallest chapel and carefully pulls open the door.

"Look," she says.

I'm afraid to. A magical child left alone in a place of the dead. I thought I was making a mistake. Now I will see exactly what that mistake is.

I peer inside, carefully, so that the girl can't see me.

My breath catches.

Flowers cascade off the closed casket. Lavender and bluebells mix with a carpet of greenery. The greenery outlines the aisle that flows all the way to the main door.

I remain in the hall and let the door close.

The child was bored, and she found a way to amuse herself. My heart catches.

"You didn't hear from Roderick, did you?" I ask Diane.

Diane shakes her head.

"I didn't notice," I say. "The flowers aren't covering Helena, are they?"

"I didn't notice either," Diane whispers.

We should check. One of us should go inside and make sure the girl didn't cover our corpse with a carpet of roses.

But I can't bring myself to send Diane in there, and I'm not going to go myself. I don't know how to tell a magical child—a flower fairy—to stop doing something.

I've been chastised by the flower fairies before.

I brought my father to their clearing, hoping he would ask them to do the flowers for his funeral home. They humored him, then made him forget.

And they punished me for sharing our relationship.

They made me promise that I would display any flowers they gave me, even when I became director of the family funeral parlor.

I agreed. I thought I had outsmarted them because I never planned to work with my family.

I was twelve.

I didn't understand the ways of the world.

I still honor that agreement, even though the contract has expired.

I have seen what happens when someone crosses them.

I adjust the placard on its board. Then I text Roderick again. *Urgent,* I type. *Please. Help.*

The smoke rises, acrid and dark. He's getting my messages.

He's just not answering.

And I don't know why.

At quarter to six, I slip into the private bath behind my office and change into my best dress. This dress is new; I bought it the day I heard of Helena's death. The dress is black with red trim—not as glamorous as hers was, but I can never do glamorous.

I don't wear a hat because hats indoors, particularly at a funeral, are often considered bad luck. But I pile my hair on top of my head and secure it. Then I slip one of the hothouse roses—also red—into the makeshift bun.

I walk on the moss. It feels warm as sunlit ground. It's comfortable and soothing, like going barefoot in the glade.

I can never be as dramatically beautiful as Helena, but I can at least honor her by looking my best.

I slip on a pair of black pumps and grab a glittery black clutch purse.

Then I head for the smallest chapel.

Diane stands outside the door to usher in anyone who shows up. It's a little after six. So far she's ushered in no one. We've received no calls, no condolences, and no questions about where to send cards.

Roderick hasn't come either.

I twist my fingers together. The little flower fairy won't know that anything is amiss at the viewing, but what do I do with her afterwards? I'm not sure she should stay with the bouquet.

Diane grimaces at me as I approach. I recognize the look; she hates these lonely viewings as much as I do. We've done too many of them over the years.

"Want me to go in with you?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Send Roderick in, though, if he ever shows up."

She nods.

I grab the oak handle on the door and pull it open.

This time, my gasp is audible. Diane crowds beside me and gasps as well.

The chapel is covered in greenery. The pews are covered in a carpet of wildflowers, the floor itself looks like it's made of moss, and trees grow in the corners. Flowers bloom on the shelves—more roses than I've ever seen, carnations, and lilies in stunning displays.

But the bouquet on the casket remains, and so does the open part of the casket itself. Helena Spenser looks like she's resting on a bier made of flowers.

"My God," Diane breathes. Then she touches my arm. "If anyone shows, should I send them in?"

"Yeah," I say. I have no idea how I'll explain this, although I've had a few fairy-sponsored magical moments before, and I've found that simple works best. "If they ask, just tell them she loved flowers."

"Okay." Diane seems reluctant to move.

I know I am. But I've come to pay my respects, and I'm going to do that. Then I'm going to sit as if I'm family and watch over her until viewing hours end.

I step inside. The aisle is so soft that my heels pierce it. I wobble. I'll do damage as I walk, so I pull off the shoes and set them by the door. They're instantly covered with grass and purple crocuses. I wonder if I'll ever get them back.

I walk on the moss. It feels warm as sunlit ground. It's comfortable and soothing, like going barefoot in the glade.

Still, I step carefully. I'm not sure where the child is. I don't want to hurt her.

I walk up to the coffin. Helena's eyes are closed, her lashes brushing her heavily made-up cheeks. She looks content, even though I'm not sure how. Corpses don't show emotion.

I glance at the bouquet, wondering how that infant fairy managed so much work in such a short period of time.

But I don't see her.

I tell myself this isn't unusual; to create this magical wonderland, she probably has to move around a lot.

But my heart is pounding.

What happens if I lost her?

What happens if she gets hurt?

I don't even know what to call her. Fairies guard their names jealously, and they don't like pet names.

I decide to cajole her. "This room has never looked lovelier."

"Good." The voice behind me is male, and it makes me jump.

I turn. The man behind me is taller than I am. He is so thin that my hand could probably encompass his waist. He wears leaves over his hips and down his legs, but his chest is bare.

His skin is green, his hair brown. Instead of looking strange, he looks gorgeous.

Such is the way of flower fairies.

"We have worked hard this afternoon," he says.

As he speaks, more fairies come out of the greenery. They're all heights, and thin. Some have green skin, some have loam-colored skin like the little fairy. Some have skin the color of ivory. Their hair often matches the flowers they carry. They are all barefoot. The men wear leaves like this man does, and the women wear skimpy dresses made of petals.

Since fairies wear nothing in the wild, they are covering themselves according to human custom.

"This is stunning," I say. "And quite unexpected."

The door in the back opens, and Roderick slips in. He's wearing a suit, and it looks stranger than anything the other fairies wear. Normally, Roderick wears tight black jeans, a t-shirt with some Goth band I don't recognize, and heavy boots.

The suit looks like an Armani, perfectly tailored to his slender frame. The white shirt beneath accents the darkness of his skin. His normally spiky hair has been combed back, and his piercings are empty.

He looks like a teenage boy told to clean up for his grandmother's funeral.

"There you are," I say with so much relief it even surprises me.

He smiles. I thread my way through the throng of fairies and stop beside him.

"I tried to contact you," I say. "I was worried."

"It's a small price to pay," he says, then sweeps his hand toward the chapel.

As he does, I see the glamour fall from his arm. The scents of moss and sunlight and a hundred flowers follow that glamour.

"If I had warned you," he says, "this would not have happened."

"Why not?" I ask.

"Because this is your domain." He bows his head slightly. "We have invaded. We beg pardon."

He thinks they've done something wrong.

"Pardon granted," I say, because you never cross fairies, no matter how well you think you know them. "I appreciate the respect for my domain. But you do need to know that I would have allowed this."

He looks at me in surprise. So do some of the others.

"This is a non-denominational chapel," I say. "What that means is the family and friends can design the service they want for the deceased. Just as you have here."

The little girl climbs into his arm. She puts her thumb in her mouth and rests her head on his shoulder. She's watching me with those emerald eyes.

The fairies had sent her ahead because they knew I wouldn't object to her. They had tried to outthink me.

He cradles her close. "You would have allowed this?"

I nod. "It's lovely. I'm sure Helena would have appreciated it."

He says, "We wanted to honor her."

"She meant a lot to you," I say, falling into my role as funeral director.

"To all of us." He smoothes the little girl's hair. "We honor her, because she honored us."

I'm surprised. I thought my staff and I were the only ones who knew about the flower fairies.

"She saw you then," I say.

"Not at first." He rests his head on the little girl's for just a brief instant. "But every day for the last sixty years, she stopped and admired our flowers."

Sixty years. Since her family died.

"Then she would murmur how lovely they were. Gradually we revealed ourselves. She visited our flowers. She played with our children. She was a bright, warm spot in the middle of our day."

I thought of that for a moment. A woman who had lost her husband and children. A woman who was looking for a way to go on. She had found it in flowers each and every day.

Then she learned the secret behind the flowers and instead of being afraid, she embraced it.

She embraced them.

As I have never dared to do.

"Do you mind if I sit?" I ask.

"Is that what you planned to do?" he asks.

I nod.

"Do you do that at all such occasions?"

"No," I say. "Only the special ones."

And this one is very, very special.

"Let's all sit," he says. He leads me to the front pew, then joins me. The little girl has fallen asleep in his arms. She has his look around the eyes and lips. I wonder if she's his.

I know so little about him—about any of them—and I am afraid to ask.

One by one, they approach the open casket, and one by one, they drop a flower inside. The flower varies—sometimes it's a daffodil, sometimes an orchid. But it's always lovely and it always fits.

When they're done, they sit in the pews. Vines cover them. Honeysuckle grows along the walls. Wisteria covers the doors.

We bow our heads in silence to this great woman. We mourn her passing and we celebrate her life.

Then, when the viewing hours are over, they all stand—and vanish.

Except for Roderick. He remains beside me.

"We'll clean this up," he says.

"Leave it," I say. "We won't use the chapel for another two days."

He smiles and touches my face. "Come see us in the glade," he says. "We miss you."

Then he, too, vanishes.

I stare at the motes of glamour, still floating where he had been. Before, I would have heard a threat in his words.

I would have been frightened.

Fairies can be terrifying.

But it took Helena to remind me that they are also extremely special.

They honored me today by respecting my chapel while honoring her.

If I treat them kindly, perhaps one day, they will decorate my chapel and sit in silent vigil after I am gone.

I hope so. Because from now on, I will remember that while flower fairies are capricious, they have oddly tender hearts. ☙

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Tío Gilberto and the Twenty-Seven Ghosts

by Ben Francisco
Illustrated by John Kaiine

29 people in a house can get kind of crowded.
It helps when 27 of them are invisible.

New York City is getting me down. The concrete is too hard, and the summer's too hot. There are lots of guys, but none of them work out because they're too pretentious, like in the poem with the guy and the albatross and water everywhere but you can't drink any of it, because of the salt. If New York were a body of water, it would have lots and lots of salt. It's the worst in the comedy clubs, when I do my stand-up routine. New Yorkers hold back their laughter like they're saving it up for the afterlife.

I get the summer off from school and I was going to stay with my parents in the Bronx like usual, but then I realized I'm an adult now and can do whatever I want. I'll go some place that people don't take themselves so seriously, where the laughs and smiles aren't so expensive. I'll spend the summer in San Francisco with my uncle Gilberto, at his haunted house.

Gilberto can't meet me at the airport because of some excuse about the moisture in the air and the aches in his back. So I have to find my way to the BART on my own and then walk from the station, a heavy duffle bag on each shoulder, the straps digging into my skin. Gilberto's building is as big as my memory of it. Five stories high, a rundown warehouse refurbished in a coat of bright purple paint, like an old woman dressed up for a night on the town.

Before I can even ring, Uncle Gilberto opens the door and gives me a big hug and a kiss that smells of gin and menthol cigarettes. His dog, Ganymede, barks and snuggles his head between my legs. The cat eyes me suspiciously from the next room. From behind me, someone helps me slip off my jacket. I look over my shoulder, but nobody's there. "Who's that?" I ask my uncle.

"That's Daniel," he says.

"Hey, Daniel," I say. "Been a while."

Gilberto shakes a finger at the air behind me. "No, you cannot also take his shirt! I told you to behave." Uncle Gil throws both hands into the air. "*Dios mío*, what have I done? Bringing my innocent nephew into a house with twenty-seven horny ghosts. *Qué barbaridad*. You tell me right away if any of them try anything, *me entiendes,* James?"

"I'm twenty-one, Uncle Gil. I'm not so innocent anymore."

Gil's hands go up toward the sky again. "*Por favor*. You kids think you invented the debauchery, but long before you were born they closed down the sex clubs and put up a parking lot."

Uncle Gil invites me to play Monopoly with him and a few of the ghosts. They're all picky about what piece they get to use, so I get stuck with the wheelbarrow. At first it's fun to watch the pieces and the dice move by themselves, the money passing between invisible hands. But it's hard to keep track of who has what properties when you can't see the other players, and Uncle Gil has to translate for me when the ghosts tell me how much the rent is. Only Gilberto can see and hear them. Ghosts can only be seen by the people they haunt.

The doorbell rings, and Gilberto opens the door to a young Asian guy with two brown paper bags of groceries in each arm and more on the floor beside him. Gilberto sets them down in the hallway by the door, then gives the delivery man a generous tip and a flirtatious rub on the shoulder. As soon as Uncle Gil closes the door, the grocery bags lift themselves into the air and parade into the kitchen. I follow them and watch as the bags are unpacked in a flurry of floating cans, fruits, and meats.

While the ghosts are putting away the food, Gilberto comes over to me and brushes his fingers through my hair. "It makes me so happy that you are here for all the summer," he says. "Finally we will have a new player for the Monopoly and the Hearts, and you can help out with the shopping too." When he says "shopping" it sounds like "chopping." Uncle Gil is okay,

but it makes me want to groan, the thought of an entire summer of shopping cart-pushing and board games with finicky ghosts.

"Sure," I say, "we should definitely hang out, you know, when I'm not at the restaurant or working on my act."

The ghosts have a party at least twice a week. They gather around the piano and sing Broadway show tunes. Gil's voice and the piano are all I hear. Late at night, they pull their favorite props out of the trunk, and the piano room is animated by top hats, black canes with white tips, and red feather boas flopping about the air in unison. When they're happy, they sing the finale from *Chorus Line*, that one that starts, "One… singular sensation, every little step she takes…" When they're sad they sing "Another Suitcase in Another Hall" from *Evita*.

I hear a lot more suitcases than singular sensations. I'm glad I'm a heavy sleeper.

Gilberto is sitting in his armchair with a glass of gin in his hand when I ask him if he wants to go out to the Clean Break Bar and Laundromat, for their open mike night.

Gil is so surprised he coughs a bit mid-sip, as if his pipes are getting crossed. "Now they are having bars in Laundromats?" he says. "I am so outside of the loop. No, I'm too old for the clubs and the comedy."

"Oh, come on, tío," I say. In that moment, I make it my mission to get him out of the house before the end of the summer. "You're only fifty-four. Maybe you'll meet somebody."

This makes him laugh. Then he looks over his shoulder with a guilty frown. "*Lo sé, Tomás, lo sé*," he says to the air behind him. "No," he says to me, shaking his head, staring into his lap. "You go on without me."

The gin bottle floats from the liquor cabinet to the coffee table to freshen up Gilberto's drink.

The far wall of the Clean Break is lined with washing machines and dryers in stacks of two. They whir in the background while musicians, comedians, and poets take the stage for a maximum of seven minutes each. I grab a beer and sign up with the goth chick at the bar, and halfway through the night I'm called to the stage. I do my comedy routine about the funniest deaths in history—Nero, Catherine the Great. It takes me a couple minutes to warm up the exhausted audience, but once I do, I have them rolling. There's a young white guy with a ponytail almost falling over with laughter as he folds a stack of blue-jeans behind the counter of the Laundromat. He's wearing a snug t-shirt that says, "Homosexuals are so gay." I find this funny, and also cute. After my seven minutes, I want to go up to him and start a conversation, but I haven't got the nerve.

Next time, I'll bring my laundry. When I hand the cute long-haired guy my sack of clothes, the conversation will flow naturally from there. He'll tell me how funny I am, and I'll tell him how cute he is, and then he'll whisk me back to his apartment and put on a Miles Davis CD, and we'll make love that's hot and sweet, like cocoa.

Something changes in me when I'm in front of an audience. I scan the shadowed faces of the crowd and find the person with a frown that broadcasts the message, "I am determined not to enjoy myself." My mission is to make that person laugh. The moment that person cracks a smile, I know I've got it. Once the smile slips out, laughter is bound to follow. Sometimes the serious person just keeps frowning the whole time, and then I feel defeated.

There were too many days when New York defeated me. I've come to San Francisco hoping for less defeat and more laughter. Also, more boys.

Right after work, I go back to the Clean Break, this time with my laundry. The same cute guy is working. It's an intimate moment, handing him a trash bag filled with my dirty clothes. He says he thought I was funny the other day. His name is Kasper.

"The friendly ghost?" I ask. He rolls his eyes. I guess everyone says that.

"My uncle has ghosts, lots of them," I say. "They're all friendly. This morning I think one of them was checking me out in the shower." He smiles but without showing any teeth, which seems patronizing and also makes him less cute. Sometimes I forget that for most people realism can't be magical. I stop talking about the ghosts, and compliment him on his t-shirt, another tight one that says, "Danger: Men at Work," like a construction sign. He says he made it himself and he smiles, this time with all his teeth sparkling, and looks cuter by the second.

He asks if I want to go out some time.

"Cool," I say.

I like San Francisco.

Most of the ghosts have their own rooms, but Tomás shares Gilberto's bedroom. I don't think the ghosts sleep—I think Tomás just lies awake beside Uncle Gil all night long. I wonder if they still spoon with each other. Gil can see and hear the ghosts, but I don't think he can feel them. I wonder what it's like to be with someone when you can't feel their touch, can't taste their lips. You'd have to keep your eyes open the whole time to remind yourself you're making love.

I ask Gil if he'll come see me at the next open mike. He says it's too hard on his back, plus he doesn't like to leave the ghosts home alone. He asks if I can do my act right here at the house, a private performance for him and the ghosts.

Gilberto and the ghosts re-arrange the living room, setting up mismatched chairs in four rows of seven. One of them brings down a desk lamp to use as a spotlight. I step into the light. The twenty-eight chairs look empty except for the one in the second row where Gilberto is sitting. My routine about comical deaths might be insensitive for this audience, so instead I do all my best jokes about cheesy gay pick-up lines.

From the moment I start, Gilberto's arms are in the air and he laughs that giant laugh of his that fills the room. I pause, listening for laughter I can't hear. "*Ay sí*," says Gilberto, clapping his hands. "*Verdad que sí*." He gestures toward the empty chairs and says, "Everybody is laughing because it's so true."

I stumble through my next joke. I want to find the ghost with a frown on his face, the one that's buried in sadness, the one that will measure my success. But I'll never find him in those empty chairs.

Kasper has one night off a week. He takes me out dancing and then back to his apartment. You can tell it's not a college dorm room because all the posters are in frames. This reminds me that Kasper is four years older than me, which is sexy. Kasper takes off all his clothes, and I can't help but think it: he's as white as a ghost. This makes me think of Uncle Gil, that I should call him so he doesn't worry.

As I dial the number on my cell phone, Kasper sucks on my nipple. This is distracting, plus it's hard to hear Gilberto because "Any Dream Will Do" is playing on the piano in the background. "I'll be home late," I tell him. "Or maybe not at all."

"*Bueno*," says Gil. "Just make sure you are using a parachute, okay, *m'ijo*?"

"Okay," I say. "*Cuidate, tio*." Kasper says it's hot when I talk in Spanish and he starts to go down on me. I hate it when guys say that, but I like him and he gives good head, so I talk a little Spanish, just to encourage him.

In the morning Kasper makes us pancakes. On the counter he finds a note from his housemate saying we were very loud last night and it kept him from sleeping. The note has lots of exclamation points and capital letters and underlines. Kasper says he wants to move out, but in the Bay area it's so hard to find a decent place.

I'm walking out the door with a ten-gallon trash bag filled with laundry when Gilberto asks, "What is wrong with my washer and dryer that you are running around the city with all these bags of filthy clothes?"

There are two answers to this question. The first is that his washer and dryer are in the basement, which is dark and a bit grimy and almost always filled with ghosts watching old, sad movies from before there was color. Or if they do have color it's that cheap grainy color that's missing half the rainbow. The ghosts watch the same movie again and again as a chorus line of handkerchiefs dab invisible tears.

The second answer is that Gilberto's washer and dryer are not staffed by Kasper.

But I don't say those things. I say, "I just need some air," and close the door behind me.

Kasper says he's not going to be working at the Laundromat forever. Someday he'll have his own business, selling the funny t-shirts he designs. He sells them to friends and at festivals, and a friend of his has promised to make a website so he can sell them online, too.

We stay up all night brainstorming ideas for t-shirts. I spout one-liners like, "These nipples are armed and dangerous." Then Kasper sketches graphic design ideas on his laptop. He says I'm the first person he's ever met who can keep up with him, in terms of t-shirts. Some day, he says, we'll be co-owners of a successful business. I'll perform my comedy act in front of a packed audience, and Kasper will have a booth by the door where he'll sell t-shirts to the mob of people who can't get enough of our cleverness.

A lot of people have dreams, but Kasper is cool because he invites the other person to be part of them.

In the sleepless morning, we're too tired to even have sex. We trudge through showers and cereal, and I head off to the restaurant, Kasper to the Laundromat. Working there is not so bad, he says, because while he's folding clothes he gets to do research, assessing the latest t-shirt fashions in people's dirty laundry.

Gilberto is letting Ganymede in from the backyard, and I ask him if he wants to come with me to the March for Marriage downtown. He says he and the ghosts already have plans to play a game of Hearts. "Don't you care about our equal rights?" I ask.

"*Claro que si*," he says. "I was an activist once, in my day. *Pero* back then no one even thought of marriage. We were too busy fighting for our lives."

I meet up with Kasper for the march. We hold hands.

"So what would you want your wedding to be like?" Kasper says, with a shy half-smile.

"Nothing pretentious," I say. "Something fun."

Kasper agrees, and we start fantasizing about weddings. The pronouns slowly shift from *mine* to *our*. It will be in a comedy club, not a church, and everyone will wear funny t-shirts with pictures of tuxes printed on them. There'll be little ceremony and lots of laughter.

Kasper is naked except for a necklace of purple beads on thin black cord. I'm naked, too. We're kissing, all wrapped up in each other's legs on a twin bed that's too small for two, trying to be quiet so as not to disturb the writer of notes of many exclamation points.

This time, Kasper whispers, he wants to feel his skin touching mine. He says he wants to have sex with me and not a piece of rubber. I smile but look away. For a moment I imagine Gilberto beside us, wagging his finger at me as he sips a glass of gin. But then Kasper is touching me, loving me, and Gilberto's image fades from my mind, because Kasper is taking up all the space in my imagination.

Kasper is right. It's amazing, the sensation of skin on skin.

Gilberto says he's upset I'm not spending more time with him and the ghosts. He feels I'm using him just because he has a house in the gayest city in the world. I don't spend much time with Gilberto and the ghosts because I don't like Broadway show tunes, and I don't like old movies, and I don't like audiences I can't see or hear.

But I just tell Gilberto he sounds like grandma. Gilberto doesn't like grandma, and doesn't like the idea he sounds like her. He frowns and puffs on his cigarette.

The next weekend I bring Kasper back to my uncle's place to avoid the cranky housemate. We're fucking on my bed when the chair at my desk topples over. I tell Kasper it must

be the wind. It doesn't bother me if the ghosts watch. I'm not modest, and even ghosts deserve a thrill now and then.

But then Gilberto barges in, arms in the air, and shouts, "Daniel! Johnny! I told you to leave him alone!" He shoos the ghosts out and tiptoes out of the room as if he had any hope of going unnoticed. "Sorry, James," he whispers. "Sorry. *Sigue, sigue.*"

Kasper sits up, his mouth hanging open, and says, "Your uncle's a perv, man."

I tell him Gilberto was just trying to stop the ghosts from spying on us, but this only seems to upset him more. He puts on his clothes and leaves.

Tío Gilberto is chopping vegetables in the kitchen when he says there are a lot of guys out there that just want to take advantage of me and I need to be careful.

I tell him I know how to take care of myself. He says that's not what he heard. He says that Daniel says he saw me having sex with Kasper without a glove. He says that Johnny has corroborated this.

"Who the fuck are you?" I say. "You fucking hypocrite. You used to go cruising the bathhouses all the time."

He drops a piece of *platano* in the mortar and smashes it with the pestle. "*Verdad que si*," he says.

I call Kasper and tell him I'm sorry and that the thing with the ghosts is really a cultural-difference thing. This makes him feel guilty. I tell him I can't wait to see him naked again. This makes him feel horny. We'll meet up on his next night off.

Ganymede has barely eaten all week and spends all his time lying behind the couch. His skin is swollen where his legs meet his body.

"This is ridiculous," I say. "He's really sick. You've got to take him to a vet, tío."

"*Callate*, James," he says, in a harsh tone of voice I almost never hear. He's on the phone for two hours, trying to find a veterinarian who will make house calls. The vet arrives at the door with a little backpack filled with medical supplies. She takes some samples for a biopsy and says she'll call Gilberto when she knows more.

A few hours later I'm in the kitchen getting a snack when the phone rings. Through the doorway I can see Gilberto in the living room, closing his eyes and bracing himself before he picks up the phone. "Yes," he says. He listens for a while and says, "I understand. Thank you."

Gilberto eases himself down to the living room floor and cradles Ganymede in his arms, carefully supporting his neck as if he were a newborn baby. I think about going to him, saying something, but I can't think of anything to say. I turn away and pad upstairs to my room.

Kasper and I have spent all night dancing and talking and having sex three different ways. Now we're sleeping at his place, curled up together in bed. I get up and slip into the bathroom to take a piss.

There's the sound of footsteps approaching, so I reach behind me to push the bathroom door shut. "James?" comes Kasper's voice. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Don't shut me out," he says with a mock tone of hurt as he pushes the door open.

"I'll be out in a sec," I say, still holding the door closed. It's silly to want privacy from someone who just went down on me, but I do.

"Let me in," he says. His tone is sharp, demanding.

"Okay," I say, and let go of the door. He comes in with a face that's angry for a moment but then quickly turns into a smile. He unzips his fly and starts pissing, too. He crosses his stream with mine. "Like *Ghostbusters*," he says. "Now we can defeat Gozer."

I fake a smile but feel annoyed as I go to wash my hands.

Ganymede is dead. Gil is sitting in his armchair smoking, an overflowing ash tray on the coffee table beside him. He's blaring *boleros* on the stereo and is working on his second bottle of gin. I'm about to try to get him to come out with me, to go dancing to get his mind off it. But then he starts to cry, big heaving cries that are even bigger than his laughs.

I never know what to do with crying people. I look around, wishing that a stool would turn itself over or a drink would float by, that a ghost would appear to comfort Gilberto. But the room is empty. I half-sit on the arm of the chair and put my arm around him. "It'll be okay," I say. Gil just keeps crying. I rub his arm a bit, but it's awkward. I go to pour him a glass of water, because I know how to pour a glass of water.

He thanks me and sips it, then chases it with a glassful of gin. He seems calmer now. "I remember when we first got Ganymede, when he was a little *perrito*, before when this house was haunted," he says, picking up his neglected cigarette and tapping away a long ash. "*Dios mío*, this place was such a *porquería* when we bought it. Everybody thought we were a bunch of *locas*, twenty-eight of us buying this old warehouse with holes in the floors and so many broken windows. We spent many years painting, fixing, arguing about where to put the statues and the tapestries. *Pero* then…" Gilberto stares off into space as he takes a long drag. His gaze seems fixed on something far away, more far away than any ghost could be.

"Daniel was the first one to get sick. *Dios mío*, he was such a tease. He could ask you to pass the salt in a way that was flirtatious. When we went to see a show, he'd dance in his seat when they did his favorite songs. *Te digo*, my heart died when I saw him in that hospital bed, so still. He wasn't really Daniel when he wasn't moving."

Then he starts crying again, wiping tears away with his wrist in between sips and puffs.

"It'll be okay, tío," I say, "*No hay mal que por bien no venga*, you know?"

Gilberto stabs his cigarette into the ash tray and violently rubs it into the pile. "Did your father teach you that? What a bunch of *mierda*. If there is one thing I've learned it's that the clouds are not having any silver linings. It's just *mal y más mal* as far as the eye can see."

Gilberto is having trouble getting his lighter to spark for

Gilberto eases himself down to the living room floor and cradles Ganymede in his arms, carefully supporting his neck as if he were a newborn baby.

his next cigarette. Suddenly the cat jumps onto his lap, and he grabs it by its fur, digging his nails into its skin. "I hate the cat!" he screeches. "I hate the cat's skin." The cat shrieks and claws back at him, but Gilberto keeps digging into it. It slips away from him, leaving behind a few strands of fur in his hand.

I take a few steps back, wondering if Uncle Gil hates my skin, too, if he'll dig his fingers into me. Then he looks down at his hands, turning his palms face-up, staring at them as if he's never seen them before. He cries again, but it's not the big, heaving sobs now, it's all tiny little cries, as if he ran out of tears a long time ago.

"I'm sorry, tío. I'm really sorry. But at least they're still here. At least you have the ghosts."

Gilberto shakes his head as he rubs his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "You still are not having any ghosts of your own. When you do, you will understand it is never the same."

I go over to him and take a cigarette from his pack even though I hate the taste of menthols. The sun outside is fading, but neither of us gets up to turn on the lights. I sit quietly with my uncle, smoking in the shadows of the dusk.

I wake up with a throbbing pain in my forehead. I touch my hand to my face and realize I'm sweating. My neck is swollen on either side of my Adam's apple. A friend of mine told me something once about how HIV starts, something about swollen lymph nodes and flu-like symptoms, but I'm not the type to freak out about things like that. Flu-like symptoms are usually just the flu.

I feel like being social, but Kasper's at work and Gilberto is sleeping in with a hangover. I'm the only living, waking person in the house.

Still groggy, I go down to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. I grab a lemon out of the fridge, and when I turn back around, my mug has a spoon in it that I didn't put there. I taste the tea, and the sweetness is so startling that I knock over the bag of Domino sugar.

"I'm feeling sick," I say to the air. "Just leave me alone, okay, guys?"

An invisible finger pushes through the sugar like a plow cutting through the snow. The glass tabletop shows through the streaks, forming letters that spell out, "PLAY WITH US."

Something about the space between the sugar makes the ghosts seem terrifying in a way they never have before. I run upstairs four steps at a time and lock myself in my room, hoping none of them are inside with me.

Kasper and I are at his place again, having sex on the too-small bed. I feel him inside me, flesh on flesh, no walls between us.

I ask him to stop.

"Why?" he asks, not stopping.

"Because," I say, pulling apart from him, "I'm afraid of ghosts."

He laughs. "Oh, come on, James," he says. "Enough with the ghosts. Anyway I thought you said they were friendly."

"They're friendly," I say, "but also sad. I don't want to be one."

"Don't be so macabre, man," Kasper says. "We're too young for that stuff. I don't believe in ghosts. You know what happens after you die? Nothing. Nothing but oblivion."

I nod. It occurs to me that I don't believe in oblivion.

Kasper looks at me and says, "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing," I say, looking away from him. "I just think maybe we need some boundaries."

Kasper's head jerks up, as if he's suddenly heard a fire alarm in the next room. "Boundaries?" he says. "You want boundaries. I'll give you a boundary. Get the fuck out of my apartment."

"Hold on a sec," I say. "I didn't mean it like that."

He picks up my clothes and throws them at me. The cold buckle of my belt stings as it hits my bare chest. I say, "Kasper, I love you," but I don't think he even hears me.

I wander around Kasper's neighborhood, trying to call his cell phone, but there's no answer. I go into the first bar I find and drink three beers in a row. I call again, and he's changed his voicemail greeting to say, "And if this is James, I think we need some boundaries for our phone calls—like, by not having them."

Shocked, I walk away from the bar and leave one more message, apologizing, begging him to call me back.

I plop back down at the bar stool and the bartender says, "Five bucks." I give him a confused look and he says, "You still owe me five bucks for that last lager." I realize I left my wallet on the bar, and now it's gone. Someone must have taken it while I was on the phone. After I search for ten minutes, the bartender shakes his head at me and tells me to scram.

It's cold outside, and I wish I had my jacket. It's impossible to know how many layers to wear in San Francisco. I take out my cell phone and dial. "James?" answers Gilberto. "*Qué pasa*? Why are you calling so late?"

"Kasper dumped me," I say. "And I lost my wallet and nobody's ever going to love me and I'm stranded in Oakland and can you come get me, tío?"

"*Ay, m'ijo*, I'm so sorry. *Pero* how would I even get there?"

"What about the Corolla in the back?" I say.

"That old thing?" says Gil. I hear his muffled voice talking to someone else. Finally he says, "Stay where you are."

An hour later the Corolla pulls up to the side of the road, and Gilberto gets out of the passenger side. "*Dios mío*, you must be freezing!" he says. "Get in, get in." He climbs into the back of the car with me. "*Vamonos ya*," he says, waving at the empty front seat. The blinker light comes on and the steering wheel

turns of its own accord. The car pulls onto the road.

"I'm sorry it took so much time," Gil says. "It took many tries to get the Toyota starting."

"I'm just glad you came," I say.

Gilberto rubs my shoulder and says, "So *qué pasó, m'ijo*?"

"I don't even know," I say, trying not to cry. "All of a sudden he lost it and kicked me out. How can he do this when we've gotten so close these past six weeks?" Gilberto looks away from me and flashes a smile at the driver's seat. Even though I can't see him I can tell the ghost is smiling back.

"Hey," I say, "don't laugh at me."

"We're not laughing," says Gil, "just remembering."

The waiting room of the clinic is so small it must be packed with ghosts. One of them—probably Daniel—knocks some papers off the front desk. The receptionist looks at the papers and frowns, then gets up to close the window, thinking it's the wind.

It was sweet of the ghosts to come. It's hard for them to leave the house, but when Gilberto comes out, they're able to follow.

Tío Gilberto is sitting beside me, his arm around my shoulder. He put it there right after I came back to the waiting room. I guess he could see I was almost sick with fear. I let my head slip back so my neck rests against his arm, which feels surprisingly solid, like the branch of an old, majestic tree.

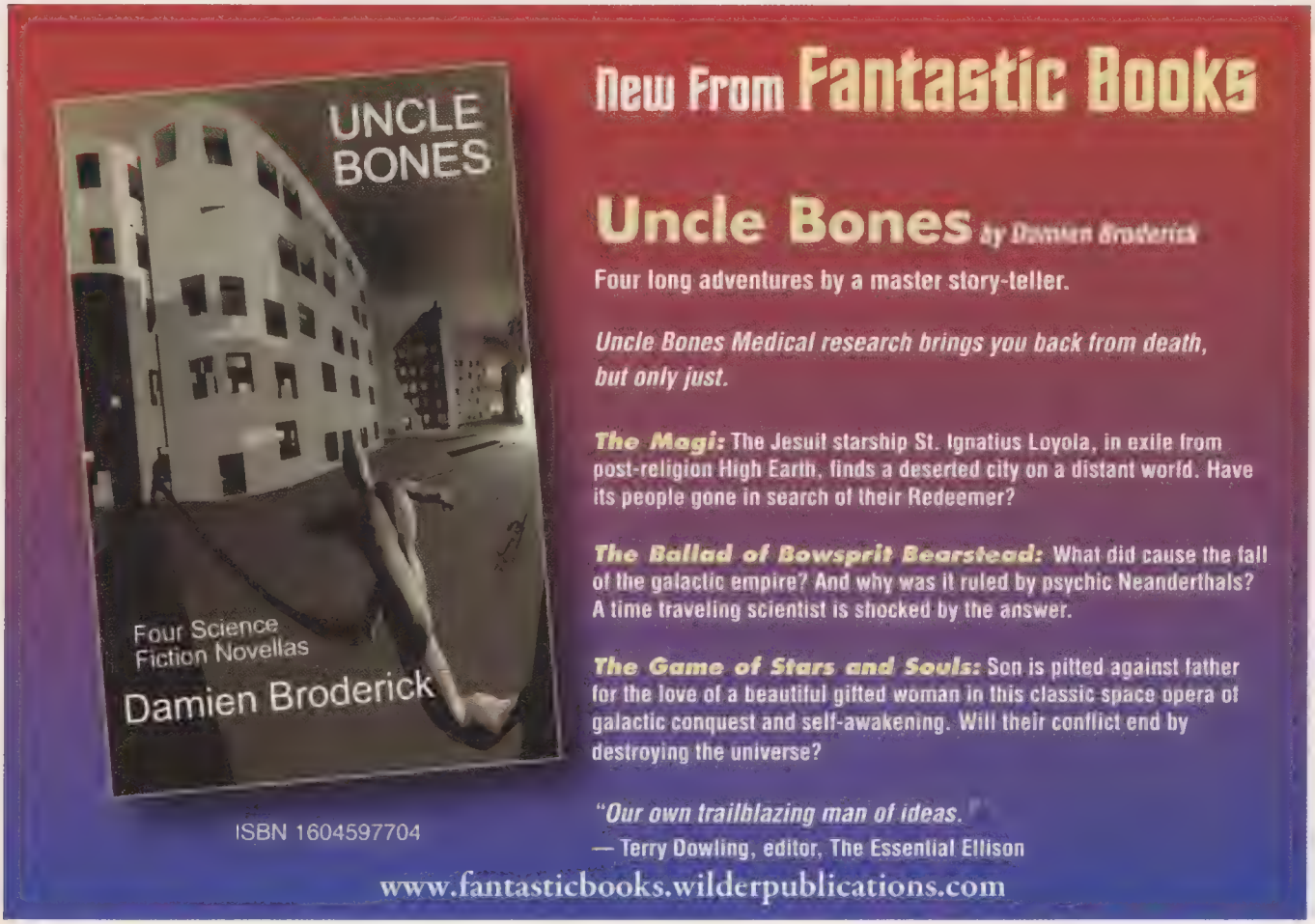
It's a rapid test, so I only have to wait a half-hour, but the waiting doesn't feel very rapid. It's hard to breathe, like the air can't find its way to my lungs.

I imagine scenarios and try to decide which one feels the most real, the most like it will happen. I picture myself walking out of the little counseling room with a smile on my face and a thumbs-up sign. The ghosts get so excited they almost knock over the desk when they cheer. Then we all go to the Dew Drop Inn around the corner, and the bartender thinks Gilberto and I are crazy to order twenty-nine drinks for just two people.

Then I think about the alternative, and I can't picture anything at all, because I'm afraid of how real it might feel.

I'm still in the waiting room, waiting with Tío Gilberto and the twenty-seven ghosts. The room is getting stuffy, since the receptionist shut the window. It's getting harder to breathe. But then some unseen force—I wonder which one?—pushes the window back up, and a gust of fresh air blows into the room. It doesn't take away the fear or even give me hope, but the coolness of the air makes it easier to breathe.

Ben Francisco's stories range from magic realism to space opera, and have been known to feature not only oversexed ghosts but also epidemics of phosphorescence, zombie musicals, and pantheistic vampire aliens who reproduce like moss. His fiction has appeared in *Dreaming Again*, the anthology edited by Jack Dann, and his nonfiction has appeared in *Fantasy*. He lives in Brooklyn with his partner. Visit his blog, Bread & Magic, at benfrancisco.net.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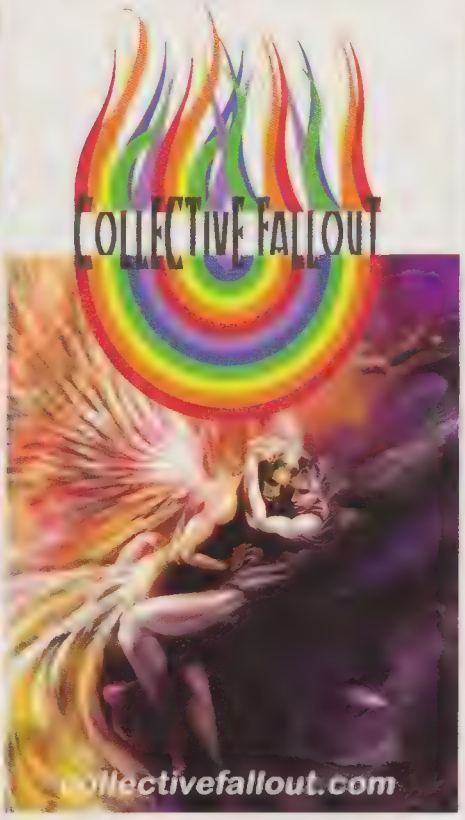

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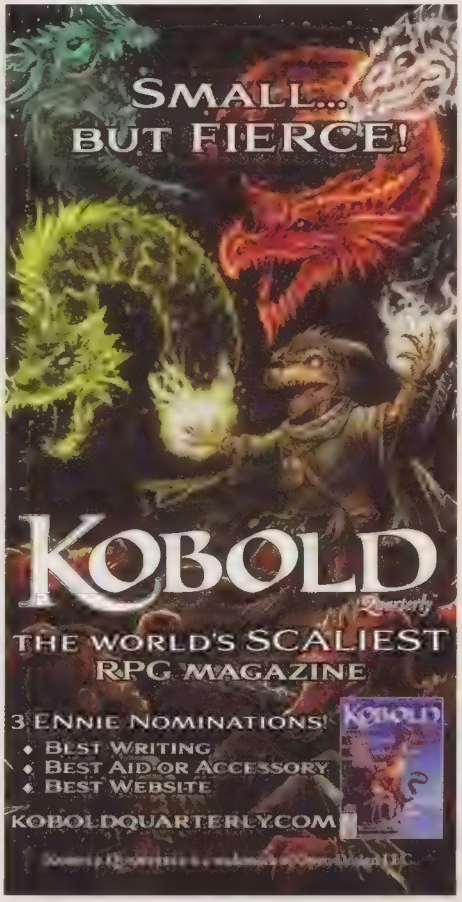


Nell and the Devil

by S. E. Ward

Illustrated by Lori Koefed

You might have met this heroine before, but never in quite these circumstances.

After her father traded her to settle a debt, Nell worked in the bawdy-house as a cinder-maid, and, later, as the lowest girl in the ranks as well. The house was owned by an imposing woman with two daughters by her late husband, both of whom serviced the wealthiest patrons, and one of whom had a son and a tidy piece of hush-money from a baronet within the royal court. The house owner, whom the working girls called Stepmother, kept her business on a tidy corner of Fleet Street; she prided herself on matching each customer to the right girl, as indicated by the weight of her customers' pocketbooks. Nell, being the lowest girl, worked what Stepmother called "the haypenny seats."

"Up on the seats, Nellie," Stepmother said each evening, usually before Nell had finished cleaning the afternoon hearths. "You'll like this one. He's got most of his teeth."

And Nell would curtsey, set her ash-bucket behind a screen, wipe the soot from her hands and face as best she could, and go out to the stable—hay for a haypenny—to see to her customer. In exchange, Stepmother moved her from the draughty attic, where the scullery maid and the little black stable-boy slept, to a room with another girl, who spent most of her time drinking or drunk.

But every few nights, Stepmother would come to Nell with a pensive look on her face, fondling the glass pearls she wore to look like a lady. She would say, "That man's back," and shoo her out. Or, once in a great while, "Get his name for me. His *real* name. And tell him not to come 'round again."

Nell knew him as Robert Sly. He was bald and washed-out and old and fat, and in the few moments Nell allowed herself to dream of life outside the bawdy-house, she imagined herself Nell Sly. He only ever paid for the haypenny seats, but he always gave Nell tuppence for herself, and despite a fancy for sucking purple marks on her skin, he was as gentle as any customer she had ever known. None of the girls but Nell ever laid eyes on him, but the little black stable-boy walked in on them once, and ran out shrieking that Nell was laying with the devil.

"You buy your freedom, Nellie," Robert Sly said as ever, slipping tuppence into her sooty stocking after the fuss had died. "Give that old bat what-for."

It came to be known, the summer Nell turned twenty, that the king's bastard son, the Duke of Monmouth, had grown tired of his mistress. The mistress was, so rumour told, a sweet-faced, demure lady, who did whatever she was asked. The duke, the dust-man said to Stepmother one very early morning, fancied someone a little bolder.

"I reckon those two daughters of yours are bold as anything, ma'am. Could do worse than spend a few shillings to set them in the king's midsummer fancy dress. I hear he hires girls to keep his guests happy. Keeps an actress himself, so you know the apple can't have fallen far." He dropped a haypenny into Stepmother's palm, emptied Nell's cinders into his barrow, and tipped his hat. "Much obliged to you, ma'am."

Stepmother closed the door. She played with her glass pearls, one eye narrowed in thought. Nell stood with her hands folded, waiting to be dismissed. She allowed herself a moment to imagine the midsummer fancy dress, with dukes and lords and the finest whores in London, all dressed in gold and pearls and gems, dancing like proper ladies and gentlemen through Saint James's Palace. (Of course, what it really meant for her was two fewer girls in the house, and hence a night earning pennies—or even shillings—rather than haypennies.) She looked up when she caught Stepmother peering at her.

Nell blinked. She could only think that the beer had gone to Stepmother's brain.

"Not a word, Nellie," said Stepmother. "Or you'll be back in the attic, with the rats."

Nell curtseyed. Stepmother dismissed her with a wave of a hand, and Nell went to steal four or five hours of sleep before Stepmother woke her to take up her cinder duties for the day.

That evening, Stepmother cracked Nell across the mouth. "Wicked slut! Your Robert Sly is here. Go with him, why don't you. Back to Hell."

"Ma'am?" said Nell, and staunched a little blood from her lip with a rag. Her heart pounded with anger. Stepmother had hit her before, but after the fact, for soot on the floor or a customer complaining of a sharp tooth.

Stepmother pushed her against the wall. Nell dared not turn her face away from the stench of pickled onion, cheap beer, and Stepmother's unwashed red dress. Stepmother gripped Nell's face.

"You tell sly Robert his wife'll have him dead again if he keeps snooping 'round. The drink took him once." She spat on the floor. "Let the devil have him this time!"

Nell blinked. She could only think that the beer had gone to Stepmother's brain. But she remembered what the little black stable-boy had said, and the tuppence Robert Sly gave her each time he visited, and the horrible things he called Stepmother. Nell curtseyed, mumbled something about changing her stockings, ran to her room, and took the bag of tuppence coins from behind the loose brick in the hearth. Each coin bore the king's head. When Nell squinted, she thought she could make out two small horns jutting from beneath his crown.

She put the coins back into their spot, got up, changed her stockings, and went to ask Robert Sly his name.

He stared when she did, then threw his head back and laughed until he had to sit in the hay.

"That witch!" He wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "The devil, am I? If I'm the devil, then she's Lord Beelzebub in the flesh!"

"Who are you?" Nell said, and steadied her voice. She said again, louder, "Who are you?"

"Your sainted Stepmother's good husband, is who I am."

Nell took a step back. Stepmother had said time and again that her husband was dead, but no one could say when or where, not even her daughters. Many a woman claimed widowhood to escape a hated man, or marry another, or simply to be wicked. Nell decided Stepmother was firmly in the last category, and fainted dead away when Robert Sly passed a hand through the stable's stone floor and brought back a handful of rancid earth.

She woke in a bed of hay, in the corner of a stall. Robert held a dipper of water to her lips. She jerked, and scrambled against the wooden wall.

"Settle down, Nellie." Robert sat a little distance away, in the hay. "You're a good girl. I'm only here to make sure that old bat don't keep you under her foot forever. Most of these girls, they crawled into her hands for whatever reasons of their own, but you didn't have much choice. Your father handed you over like you was a shilling, which is about what he owed, as I gather, and I don't much suppose you deserved it."

"Go back to the devil, sly Robert!"

Robert Sly made a noise in his throat, a butchered laugh. "I been tainted by the devil's blessing, but he don't got time for me. He's got his spiky hands full of vicars that preached in the daylight and strangled in the dark, and goodwives that poisoned their husbands' drink so they could wear glass pearls bought with the work of honest bawdy gals. I never pretended to be nothing but a carter who liked his beer. Like you, Nellie. You don't pretend to be nothing but a cinder-maid and a whore. The devil got no truck with the likes of us."

He reached forward. Nell went rigid with fear when he took her wrist and laid tuppence on her palm. His touch was as warm as ever, and he smelled like Robert Sly, not a hint of brimstone, when he kissed her on the cheek.

"You buy your freedom from that old bat, Nellie. I got a feeling it'll come soon."

For weeks, Nell saw nothing of Robert Sly. She cleaned the cinders, and worked the haypenny seats, and said her prayers that the devil would not return. While she cleaned the cinders in Stepmother's room, she watched the two daughters fit two elaborate costumes, sewing and gluing and beading and making great, white swans from curtains and goose feathers.

The daughters, Anne and Catherine, chatted while they worked: Anne about seeing her son again, as he lived at school on his mother's hush-money, and Catherine about her excitement at seeing the court. They were pretty enough, rosy-cheeked and industrious, and would make fine wives were they not whores. They were Robert Sly's daughters, Nell realised with a start, and she hurried to clean the cinders and curtsey to the daughters, who held up Anne's great, feathered mask so Nell could say how lovely it was.

Stepmother stopped Nell just outside the door. Nell's arm trembled with the weight of her bucket as Stepmother squeezed her shoulder.

"Leave my daughters alone. I got half a mind to fling you out on your ear, but then *he'd* have you."

"Have I done something, Stepmother?"

Stepmother pinched Nell's ear. Nell bit her lip, lest she scream with the pain.

"I heard you and sly Robert in the stables last night, little Nellie. Talking about your plan to take my daughter's dress and go to the king's party in her place. It's bad enough you're quimming 'round gratis, but I won't have you touch a thread on their things!"

"He hasn't been here in weeks, ma'am! I haven't seen him!"

"I heard you talking, Nellie! Or was it the devil he was plotting with?"

Nell swallowed. "I don't know, ma'am. Only, he says the devil's got no truck with him."

Stepmother paused. She grunted, and let go of Nell's ear. "I think that's the kindest thing anyone's ever said about the devil. Get back to work, you wretch."

She went to wake the rest of the girls in time for evening; her red dress shushed with every quick step. Nell let go a breath, and felt a bit stupid for standing in the hall when there was work to be done.

Another two weeks passed, and Anne and Catherine begged their mother for a last night to finish their dresses. Stepmother insisted there were customers waiting. Finally, Anne mopped her eyes and said she would see to them all, if Catherine could have the night. Stepmother slapped Nell for it, and told her in no uncertain terms to stay in the haypenny seats with her skirts up for anyone with the money to spend.

By the time six men in a row finished their business, Nell was sore and soggy and shaking with hatred. Stepmother had no right to tell her daughters to see to customers while there was sewing left to do. It had been Stepmother's idea to send Anne and Catherine to the duke. And, though not nearly as bad, she had no right to take her rage with Catherine out on Nell. Nell pushed her skirts down and sat up. Robert Sly formed in front of her, smoke and shadows. He kissed her before she could shout, did his business, and tucked something cool and metallic in her stocking.

"Turn it once tonight at midnight," he said. "In the air. It'll turn back by itself at midnight tomorrow, so pray the duke's finished with you by then."

Nell stared. Robert Sly looked at her soiled stockings and her ragged cloth shoes. With all the care of a patient husband, he removed her right shoe and kissed her toes.

"Buy some slippers," he said. "The nicest ones you can afford."

"I thought you wanted me to buy my freedom."

"Slippers first."

Before Nell could ask why slippers should come before freedom, Robert Sly pulled down the neck of her shift and sucked a sharp purple mark between her breasts. He smiled, and faded into nothing.

For a moment, Nell could only stare at where Robert Sly had been. She scrabbled to take the thing from her stocking. Rather than tuppence, it was a key.

She managed to escape the haypenny seats before midnight, and listened for church-bells in the privy, shouting at anyone who came knocking that she was ill. At the stroke of twelve, she turned the key in the air as Robert Sly had asked. It met resistance. She drew her hand away, and thought she saw a faint keyhole glowing around the end of the key where it hung in the air. A moment, and the key vanished.

Come morning, when Stepmother sent her off to bed, Nell hurried upstairs and got her money, the bag of tuppence pieces from Robert Sly. The devil's own or not, he was no worse than Stepmother. She climbed out the window, went down a trellis, and hurried to find a shop that sold ladies' shoes.

The weight of a night's work strained her judgement, but after an hour of looking up and down Fleet Street, Nell found them: white satin slippers of the Oriental style, with pointed toes and hundreds upon hundreds of tiny glass beads sewn on. When Nell asked how much they were, the well-dressed woman tending shop gave her a funny look and said, "Ten shillings."

Ten shillings was very nearly all the money Nell had. She picked up a corner of her skirt and curtseyed. "They're for my mistress. For a party. Could I try them? We have the same feet."

"Let's see your money first."

Nell took the bag from where she had hidden it in the top of her shift, below the purple mark Robert Sly had left on her. She trembled while the woman counted the coins. On each one, the king's horns seemed to grow, though in the shop's light they might have only been part of his wig. The shop woman finally scooped most of the coins into a pile, dropped a few back into Nell's bag, and went to get the slippers.

Nell's stockings were clean enough that the woman let her try them. They fit. Nell held out one foot and watched the glass beads shine in the sunlight coming through the shop's open door. She smiled.

"They do your mistress, then?" said the shop woman.

Nell nodded. "Thank you, miss."

Only with pain did she remove the slippers. It seemed like a waste. She had nothing to wear but a pair of shoes, though there was enough money left for a mask. For all she knew, a mask, some clean stockings, and the slippers would be enough to content the king. Or, perhaps, she would wear the shoes to dance in Hell when the devil came to fetch her. She hurried home. At the top of the trellis to her window, she apologised to God and reminded Him that her soul was worth little.

When Stepmother knocked to wake her, Nell could hardly lift her head from the straw mattress. Her chamber-mate snored next to her, reeking of wine even in sleep. Nell got up, knocked twice on the door to say she was awake and dressing, and stepped back as the door opened, something Stepmother never did.

"Mistress." Two maids, a uniform black from the tops of their smooth heads to the hems of their skirts, bobbed curtseys. The hallway was no longer the hallway. A fire burned, and Nell could just see hints of a mirror, a dressing table, and a great wardrobe.

One of the maids hurried to the bed, under which Nell

Her lips were the red of Stepmother's unwashed dress, and her mask was a death's head wreathed in black flowers.

had hidden her slippers. (Had Stepmother found them, Nell planned to give up the jig by saying she had saved her coin to buy a better life, then decided that Anne and Catherine deserved it more.) The maid was not black like the stable-boy, who was more brown than anything. Rather, she looked as though she had been polished with pitch.

In the room where the hallway ought to have been, the maids bathed Nell, and rubbed scented oils into her skin, and brushed her hair. In the end, the only marks that remained on her body were the blackened roughness of her palms and knees, and the purple mark between her breasts. They dressed her in black, stockings and shift and farthingale and all. On her head, they placed a great wig, as black as her clothing. Her lips were the red of Stepmother's unwashed dress, and her mask was a death's head wreathed in black flowers. After a moment's quiet discussion, which sounded like the buzzing of flies, the maids put gloves on her hands. And the dress. Nell had never imagined such a dress: black velvet with sleeves slit to pour out swathes of silk. It was finer than even the queen's wardrobe, or so she fancied.

A clock struck, only once. The maids hurried to affix a necklace of black pearls, and they helped Nell into her white slippers. They hurried her out onto Fleet Street (without stairs, though they were two flights up), where a coach waited, as black as the maids, as black as the dress. The driver wore a hood, and when Nell turned away from the three horses that drew the thing, she saw, from the corner of her eye, a great, three-headed dog pawing the street, its massive jaws sodden and hungry.

The coach took her not to Saint James's Palace, but to the king's private park, where peacocks and pelicans and deer roamed free, to decorate or be hunted. A footman, who looked like the black maids in a man's suit, helped Nell down. She strode past the guards. Their eyes glazed, and they only gave her a bow and a, "Good evening, milady."

Lords and ladies and whores danced and talked and ate and drank, and went off into the trees to do their business. Nell saw Anne and Catherine, dancing with two men in identical Spanish suits. They looked happy. They laughed. In the light of torches, their goose feathers turned them into swans.

When Nell came near, Anne and Catherine and their men paused in their conversation to stare. Nell realised that most everyone was staring, and they all wore white. She drew herself up and marched across the lawn. Whatever Robert Sly's intentions, he had fouled their execution. Nell cursed herself for making such a deal with the devil, and such a fool of herself.

Someone stopped her with a hand to the arm. "You're a bold one, aren't you?" said the man, who wore a black wig with his white suit, and looked fairly young, perhaps thirty, beneath his silver domino. "My father asked everyone to wear white. I don't know how you got past the guards, but I'm not about to toss you out now you're in."

Nell stifled a squeak, and curtseyed to the Duke of Monmouth so far her knees wobbled. "Your Grace."

He bowed, and took her arm. Looking around, he said, "You'd better stay with me until I can smooth this over with my father."

"I'm sorry, Your Grace. My benefactor provided the dress. He never said—"

"It's all right." The duke craned his neck, looking for something or someone. "What is your name?"

"Eleanor," said Nell, who had vague memories of her mother calling her that. And because the name felt wrong, she said, "Nell."

The duke smiled. "My father has a mistress named Nell. She's an actress. Would you care to dance?"

Nell had only danced a handful of times with the other girls, while the little black stable-boy played a Jew's harp and the scullery maid drummed her pots. She did her best to pay attention to the music and her feet and the duke rather than the stares she got from all around, and managed to neither trip nor flail as she skipped beneath an archway of other dancers' arms. Once, she caught Anne's eyes and saw not a trace of recognition, though perhaps a bit of longing. Nell turned to the duke and tried not to picture Anne and Catherine in ten years' time, still opening their legs for paying nobles and taking hush-money to educate their sons.

The dance ended. Nell, feeling rather sweaty in her black gown, curtseyed to the duke, and considered whether or not it was proper form to ask for a drink. The duke bowed to a man wearing a gold lion's mask and leading a red-haired woman. The man stopped, and set his walking-stick at a jaunty angle.

"I think you're going to have to explain this one to me, James. Is white black, or has black gone white?"

Nell went hot beneath her makeup, but the duke laughed. "The young lady informs me that her benefactor chose the dress. Perhaps he had his eyes closed."

The king chuckled, and said to Nell, "And who is your benefactor, my dear?"

Nell found her tongue, and bent her knees until she all but sat on the grass. "He prefers to—prefers to remain anonymous. Your Majesty. Sir."

Her heart sped up. A duke should not go to the haypenny.

"I see." The king smiled, and nodded to the duke. "I'll see you later, then? Alone or together?"

"We'll see." With that, the duke led Nell one way, and the king led his lady the other. Nell looked back. She realised she was trembling.

The duke took her hand and looked at her sidelong. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Thank you."

"Good. I'm parched. Should we get a drink?"

They had shaved ice with cordial, something Nell had never imagined possible in summer, and danced some more, and sat down at the stroke of ten for a great supper of meat and fowl and too much wine. The wine went to Nell's head, and she did not quite have her senses with her when the duke suggested they go

for a walk in the park.

The paths were lit with lanterns, and here and there, in alcoves made from privet or trees, lanterns hung in advertisement of ready privacy. At least one couple had taken advantage of the light, and the woman's whimpers cut through the haze in Nell's head just enough for her to realise that she was making her way to the haypenny seats.

Her heart sped up. A duke should not go to the haypenny seats. A duke should go to Anne or Catherine, in a room with a feather mattress. But Robert Sly had sent her instead of his own daughters. Devil's blessed or not, he had to have a reason. Nell wobbled as the duke helped her to sit on a stone bench within a circle of privet.

He caught her with a hand to her belly. Nell gasped at the touch. It felt too intimate and sudden for the haypenny seats. The duke grinned.

"You're a fiery one, aren't you?" He kissed her hand. "May I?"

Nell nodded. No one had ever asked her permission before, not in the haypenny seats. The duke kissed her neck and worked his way across her chest, above her black dress. She closed her eyes and put a hand on his back. At worst, she would spend a few uncomfortable minutes with the king's son. At best, she would enjoy herself, which often happened with Robert Sly, and perhaps gain some hush-money of her own within the year. The duke knelt before her, removed her white slippers, ran his hands up her legs, and stopped at her knees.

With a confused little scowl beneath his domino, he pushed up her skirts and pulled down her stockings to bare the hard, black patches of skin on her knees. Nell dared not move. She gripped the stone bench with both hands. The duke would shout for the guards, have her dragged away as an impostor or a thief. Still scowling, the duke took her hand and tugged away her glove. Nell closed her fingers over the blackened calluses on her palm.

"Your benefactor, hmm?" The duke eased Nell's fingers open. "Your mistress, or her husband?"

Nell shook her head. Sly Robert's purple mark burned upon her chest. The duke looked at her face, then glanced down. He put his hands out, as though asking permission, and eased her breasts apart to bare the mark.

"Your mistress, indeed," he said. "Or your trade."

Nell felt as though she would burst if she did not speak the truth. "I made a deal with the devil to be here. Your Grace. Sir."

The duke blinked. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. Something cool and metallic formed in Nell's hand. The key. Against her palm, she felt it turn.

On Westminster, the church-bells began to strike. Nell gathered up her skirts and fled into the dark. The duke shouted after her, but she upped her speed. The thunder of hooves, the snarl of a great dog, the creak of wheels rolled alongside her. The hooded driver reached down and pulled her into the seat next to him. She turned her head to thank him. His hood stood empty and hollow. Nell faced the park, which split to darkness before them.

She woke in her bed. Naked, her makeup gone, her chamber-mate snoring beside her. Nell got up and put on her shift, which lay folded over the back of a chair. She looked out into the low hallway. It was the same as ever. The sun was rising, and the sky shone grey through the window of her room. She had dreamt everything, the devil, the duke, though not the purple mark between her breasts.

She stepped back to close the door. Stepmother seized her wrist.

"I feed you, I give you a roof and good, honest work, and this is how you repay me, little miss? Sneaking out all afternoon and staying there 'til sunup? On the night of the king's ball, no less. I'll bet you had a royal ball yourself." Stepmother hauled her into the hallway, and shoved her toward the attic stairs. "You can sleep with the rats from now on! And if I find you were sizing up the duke for yourself, you can sleep in the street!"

On Westminster, the church-bells began to strike. Nell gathered up her skirts and fled into the dark.

Nell stopped. Tried to turn. Tried to argue. Tried to slap Stepmother across the face. But as much as her heart wanted to, her mind and limbs would not let her. She had nowhere to go, and only a deal with the devil and the memory of the Duke of Monmouth to keep her warm. She walked upstairs, where she slept for the better part of an hour until Stepmother hauled her out of bed, shoved a torn dress into her hands, and told her to get to work.

That evening, after Nell had cleaned the hearths, stoked the fires, scrubbed the floors, and helped the little black stable-boy carry linens and shifts to the washer-woman up the road, Stepmother called the girls into the downstairs room and made Nell stand in the middle.

"I want you all to keep an eye on Nellie, here," said Stepmother, strolling around Nell like a hawk waiting to strike. "She ran away last evening. To the king's party. Cinder Nell!"

The girls laughed, though it sounded forced and painful. Anne and Catherine bowed their heads. Anne's face was streaked with tears, and Catherine looked older than her eighteen or so years. Stepmother stopped and smiled at Nell.

"I was considering giving you a proper room," she said. "Take you out of the haypenny seats. But now you'll be there 'til the drink takes you." She gave the rest of the girls a cool look. "You lot remember that, in case any of you get ideas."

A knock sounded at the door. Stepmother pushed Nell toward the back of the room, where she could hurry to the haypenny seats. The girls took their places in various chairs and behind the bar. Stepmother patted her hair in its elaborate knot, and opened the door.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Looking for some company?"

"Some particular company." A handsome man of perhaps thirty, in fine clothing and an expensive wig, stepped inside, followed by two others—not so young nor fine, but finer than anything in the bawdy-house. The young man held Nell's glass-beaded slippers. The duke. The Duke of Monmouth. "Could I speak with your cinder-maid, please?"

Stepmother grew pale where the white lead had smeared from her face. She drew herself tall. "I've dismissed her. Wicked girl, makes pacts with dark forces."

The duke's eyes glittered. Nell gripped her skirt and took a step back.

"You wouldn't happen to know where she's gone, would you?" said the duke. "I'm afraid she's lost her shoes. The label was for a shop on Fleet Street, and I've been searching the area for her all afternoon."

"Nell," said Catherine, her voice soft and meek. Anne swallowed, and tears hung in her eyes. "Do you know this gentleman?"

Nell gave a silent prayer that she would not lose what little position she had left, and came forward. She dropped the duke a curtsey. He kissed her hand and looked at the palm.

"You're a cinder-maid, that's for sure. Forgive me for my openness, but could I see your breasts?"

"Sir!" said Stepmother. "If you're worried about her womanhood—"

"Your Grace," said Nell, and fumbled with the neck of her shift. The duke gave the slippers to one of his fellows and eased Nell's shift aside, just enough to bare the purple mark.

"You forgot your shoes," he said, staring at the mark. "A strange slip for such a bold woman."

Nell dropped a curtsey in apology, and glanced sidelong at Anne and Catherine. They looked crushed. There was no telling what Stepmother would do to them for letting the cinder-maid steal the duke's interest for however long or short. And Robert Sly had been right about one thing above all else: she had no illusions of being anything but a cinder-maid and a whore. Two sisters, two shoes. Even the shoes were worth more than her.

Nell stepped back, tied her shift, and said, "Forgive me, Your Grace. They're not my slippers."

"Then whose are they? Your benefactor's?"

Nell shook her head. She pointed to Anne and Catherine. "Theirs, sir. They saved their money and bought one each."

Nell felt Anne and Catherine's surprise and Stepmother's cruel smugness more than she saw it. The duke frowned, and stepped away to speak with his fellows.

Nell rubbed her arm. Robert Sly was a clever man, and perhaps a bit more of the devil's own than he let on. Anne and Catherine, though, were kind and dear, and deserved better than to be part of their mother's trade. Nell blinked, and understood why Robert, sly as he was, had been so insistent she buy a pair of shoes, and why he had been so generous for so long. The devil's own he might be, but he loved his daughters. Nell wondered if she would ever see him again after Stepmother flung her out.

The duke nodded to his fellows, and motioned to the door. "Would the owners of these slippers please come with us? You made rather an impact last night." He turned to Nell. "You as well. Anyone that can face down the devil would appreciate life in the court."

Nell's mouth fell open. Stepmother spoke in her silence.

"Of course, I'll come too. As the owners' mother."

"Our parents are dead, Your Grace," said Anne. "This woman is only our stepmother."

"Is she, now?" The duke lifted his eyebrows at the red forming between smears of Stepmother's makeup. He motioned to the door. Four royal guards appeared in the doorway, and Stepmother stiffened before she dared argue her case. "If you three ladies would join me? Your stepmother has my word that you'll be in safe hands."

In the end, despite Stepmother's dwindling insistence that she deserved money, or status, or whatnot, Anne became mistress to a count, who paid for her son's schooling and eventual appointment to the army, and Catherine married a minor earl. Nell bore the duke three children, then watched from well behind his wife when he was executed for warring against his uncle for the throne. It took eight strikes of the axe, and a butcher's knife, to remove his head. That, however, came at the end.

Robert Sly was a clever man, and perhaps a bit more of the devil's own than he let on.

Much more pleasant was the final time Nell saw Robert Sly. She was resting in her Mayfair apartments, recovering from the birth of her son, when sly Robert appeared, like smoke in reverse.

"Good girl," he said, patting her hand. "The devil got no truck with the likes of you."

Nell smiled. "How are you?"

"Same as I'll ever be. And glad for you."

"You've been so good to me." Nell struggled to sit up, weak from pain and gore. Robert Sly helped her. "How is Stepmother? Have you seen her?"

Robert Sly grinned. "You'll have to ask the devil that. He took her on the front of a cart this very morning."

With that, Robert Sly kissed Nell on the cheek. "You behave yourself, Nellie. Be my good girl."

And he, and the last of Nell's life as a whore and cinder-maid, were gone. ☙

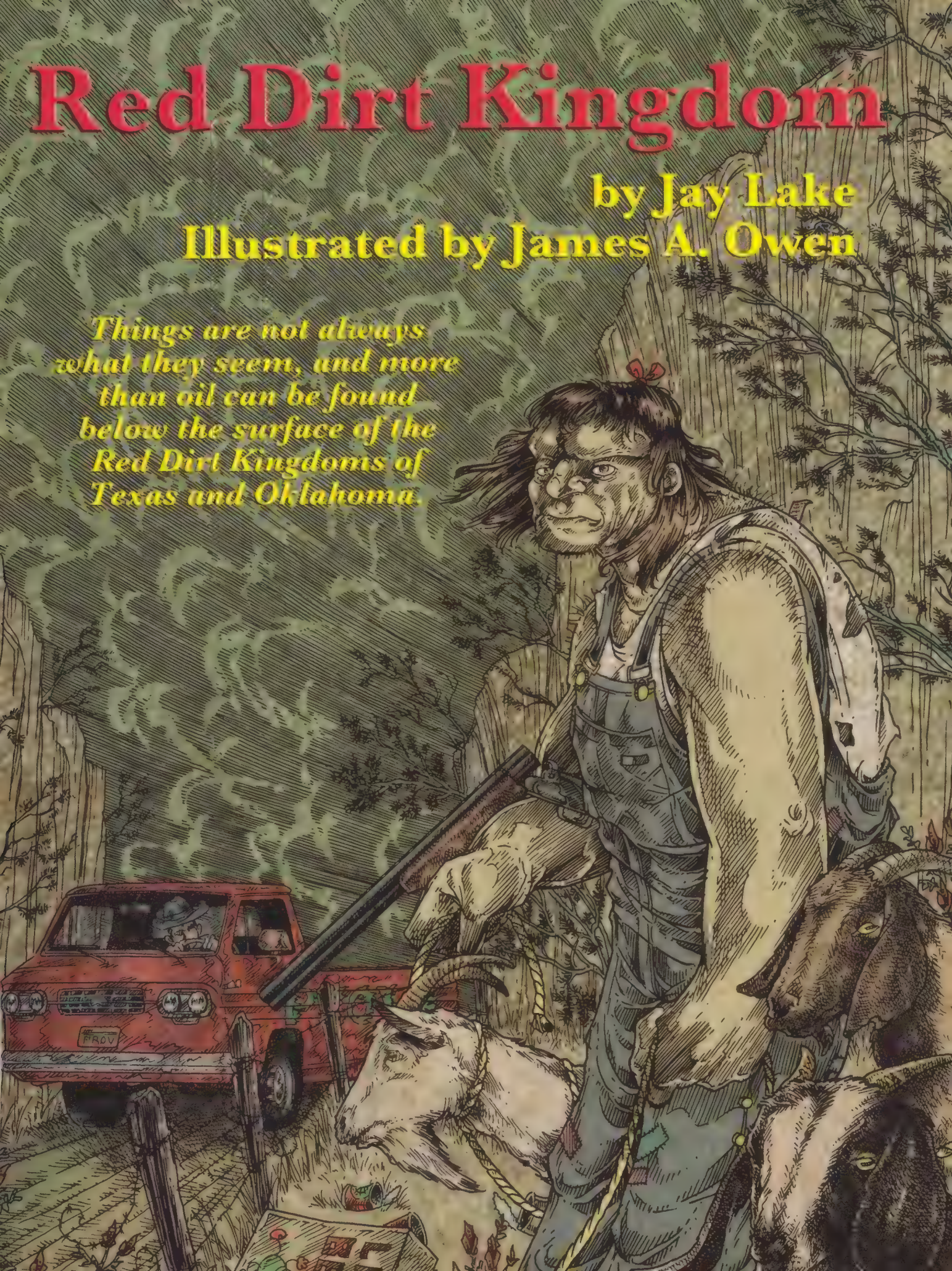
S. E. Ward hails from Oklahoma, where she was abandoned by monkeys and raised by engineers. When not writing, she knits, sews, and acquires new hobbies at an alarming rate. She is owned by a very tiny cat. ☙

Red Dirt Kingdom

by Jay Lake

Illustrated by James A. Owen

Things are not always what they seem, and more than oil can be found below the surface of the Red Dirt Kingdoms of Texas and Oklahoma.



Once upon a time there was a goat-roper name of Artemisia Cleminshaw lived out in the cedar breaks of western Williamson County. Artie was a woman of vision and discernment, and kept only the best junked cars on her back forty. She preferred Fiats and Porsches to the Buicks and Mercurys favored by her neighbors. Artie's dogs didn't bark no more than those around her, and she rarely loosed off firearms after midnight or before noon. For all that, she was a woman with a silent life, sad and lonely on her land, wishing for something more that had never arrived.

Came a day when the Proverbial Stranger arrived in Artie's corner of the county. Prov, as he liked to be called, drove an old rampside Corvair pickup with only a little bit of bondo. Prov had his name painted on the side in foot-high lime-green letters and a tasteful bit of flamework on the rear-facing side of each. He dressed fast, too, in a green-and-yellow cowboy suit straight out of the second ring of a three-ring circus. His ostrich-hide boots were dyed to match the yellow, and his eyes were the exact same shade of green. His hair was shiny black like motor oil, but clean as a boiled egg.

Prov, he parked that Corvair on the crumbling red dirt edge of the bar ditch outside Artie's place, pushed open the gate, and came walking down the rutted driveway whistling Dixie loud as you please. This might have been polite doings back where he came from, but out in the cedar breaks it's mighty pushy. A person waits for an introduction before crossing into someone else's holdings.

Artie happened to be outside with a shot gun and a case of lima beans, so she was prepared for unexpected company.

Artie happened to be outside with a shot gun and a case of lima beans, so she was prepared for unexpected company. She flung one of the cans into the brush off to the left while sneaking right to draw a bead on the intruder.

Our boy Prov's mother didn't raise no fool. And Prov hadn't acquired no bad habits later in life, either. When the lima beans hit the scrub brush, he ducked away from the racket and slid between a pair of peeling cedar trunks that smelled like grandma's wedding chest gone to rot.

That was where Artie and Prov met face-to-face.

The Proverbial Stranger was handsome as a Fredericksburg peach, and by the look of him, twice as sweet. Artie, on the other hand, would have needed a beauty operator and two pounds of stage makeup to look half as good as forty miles of bad road. Her face would scare a blind coon dog, not to put too fine a point on the affair. She was a shambling gal, with a body could have been sewn together from a couple of football linemen with a librarian thrown in for good measure. The patched-up overalls and wifebeater shirt she wore only emphasized her unusual proportions.

"Holy Light!" shouted the Proverbial Stranger. Artie was so plumb amazed at the vision of masculine perfection before her that she dry-fired her over-under shot gun as her panties went damp.

And so beauty met the beast.

After certain tense negotiations were settled, Artie led the Proverbial Stranger out of the cedar break and back to her trailer. It was a 1957 Crown Luxe single-wide the color and texture of duct tape. She had a cable spool out front for a dinner table, and a pair of folding chairs her cousin Mayfair had brung over from the Fontevrault Bible Church down near Lockhart.

"Beer?" She fished a Lone Star from a Little Oscar cooler.

"No, thanks. I don't drink."

"Pity." She eyed him warily. "Don't get much company, me."

He was working hard on his smile. "Don't see why not." The Proverbial Stranger's voice only cracked a little with the lie.

Mistaking him, she smiled back. That was enough to give a preacher the shakes. "Don't never get no company so pretty as you."

Embarrassed, Prov coughed. "I'm, erm, looking for someone."

Artie's smile dissolved into a chilling effort at a simper. "I think you done gone found her."

"No, no you don't—" he stopped at the look on her face, then dug a grubby, folded slip of paper out of his pocket. "I'm the Proverbial Stranger, and I'm looking for the Secret Heir." He unfolded the paper, then turned it over. "One, erm, Art Cleminshaw. It … it said 'Cleminshaw' on the mailbox out front."

Her smile bloomed like napalm in the jungles of 'Nam. "Light my shoes and call me a firecracker, I *am* Art Cleminshaw. *Artemisia* Cleminshaw, sir. How is my air secret?"

"Air?"

"Air."

"Oh. Heir." At that point the Proverbial Stranger was badly rattled by the way his mission was playing out. "You have a twin brother, maybe?"

"Nope. Just me."

"Cousin Arthur?"

"Nope."

"Dad?"

"Not no more."

"Oh."

She leaned so close he could smell lima beans and dog food on her breath. The stained wifebeater shifted sagged alarmingly under the bib of her overalls. "So what's my secret, handsome?"

"Proverbial," Prov said absently. "Handsome's my brother."

Artie's voice got tight, pitching higher. "Lookie here, mister, the last good thing that happened to me was when the Wal-Mart in Round Rock had triple discount day in the sports department. And that's been a while. So if there's some air-fairy secret you've come to give me, I'd care to hear it. Otherwise I'd be much obliged if you'd just set a spell and keep a girl company."

He barely managed not to ask her what girl, where. Instead

"Lookie here, mister, the last good thing that happened to me was when the Wal-Mart in Round Rock had triple discount day in the sports department."

the Proverbial Stranger took a deep breath and steeled what was left of his nerve. "Says here that one Art Cleminshaw is heir to the Red Dirt Kingdoms of Texas and Oklahoma."

"Red Dirt Kingdoms?" Artie looked around, peering into the brush. "You got some tee-vee cameras gonna pop out in a minute? That's the stupidest thing I've heard since… since I don't know when."

"Secret Kingdoms," said Prov. "You know, the hidden life of the world. Where the buffalo roam in countless numbers and nobody cares about the Dallas Cowboys. Hence the Secret Heir."

"Why don't you go on home and finish drinking the rest of the brake fluid," Artie suggested.

"I'd love to, once I find Art Cleminshaw."

"Listen here, goat-breath. I'm tired of your stuff. There ain't no Art Cleminshaw. There's only me. Artie."

"Well, and that would be a problem." Prov folded his paper up and stuffed it back in his pocket. "Seeing as how the Secret Heir to the Red Dirt Kingdoms needs to be a man."

Artie got her dander up. It was frightening to behold. "There ain't nothing a man can do that I can't."

"I'm perfectly prepared to believe that," said Prov, recovering some of his usual smoothness. "But nonetheless, being male is a prerequisite for being King."

"There was that Egyptian pharaoh, Hat's-Upset, that was king. She just went and declared herself a man."

"Hatshepsut," corrected Prov, who couldn't have been more surprised if Artie had started spouting string theory.

"Whatever. It can be done." One meaty fist pounded the cable spool table. "And I'm just the girl to do it!"

Prov threw his arms wide. "But you have a life here, your friends… well, goats… well… whatever you have."

She leaned forward again, grabbing his lapels and dragging Prov until they were nose to nose. "If you think you're leaving without me, Proverbial Stranger, you can just think a little harder." Then she kissed him. It was an unusual experience, to say the least, the taste of lima beans and dog food and several decades of loneliness rolled into one pair of lips and a chapped, questing tongue. "A *lot* harder," she added in what was supposed to be a seductive whisper.

"Hard is the farthest thing from my mind right now," he managed. "Do you have any whiskey?"

"You said you don't drink."

"Changed my mind."

A few minutes later she came banging out of the trailer's screen door with two black garbage bags. "I'm ready!"

Prov hadn't had the nerve to run off while Artie was inside. "Is that it?" he asked. Somehow he'd imagined it would be the work of hours for Artie to, as she'd said, "pretty up and get packed."

"Yeah. Why?" She turned and looked at the trailer. "Think I might ought to torch the place?"

"No, no, let's just… go." Prov was imagining the conversation he was going to have with the Foreman of the Red Dirt Kingdoms.

"We can take one of my trucks."

"I left mine out front," he said. "And I know the way."

She thumped him on the back hard enough to make Prov choke up some of the whiskey still burning his throat. "Tee-riffic. Let's go."

Later, rolling up a cracked blacktop somewhere deep in the Texas Hill Country, Artie started asking questions. "You're Proverbial, and your brother's Handsome. There's bound to be a Mysterious around the place."

"That's Dad." Prov said. "He works for the Prince of Taos."

Her hand came to rest on his thigh. "Everybody in your secret places have names like that?"

"There's plenty of guys named Bob and Phil, but people with special names do special jobs."

"Nommy native determinism."

She'd done it again! "Where do you pick this stuff up?"

The hand jerked away. "A girl reads. I got a life of the mind."

"I wasn't complaining," he said. "I was surprised."

"Surprised. Huh. Why? 'Cause I'm a goat-roper? Or 'cause I'm fat and middle-aged and funny-looking?"

"You're not—" he said reflexively, then realized he couldn't lie to her. He'd discovered he owed Artie more respect than that.

"Not what?" Her voice was dangerous, growling to match the Corvair's ancient transmission.

"Not what I expected." Not what he'd thought she was.

"Nice save, lover boy."

After that they both watched the miles for a while.

Prov pulled the Corvair up next to a line of beat-up Harleys out front of a crossroads café in rural Wise County. The sign read "Crossroads Café."

"You hungry?"

She folded her arms. "Nope."

Broke, he thought. "I'll get this one, you get the next one."

Some expression flashed across her face, but Prov couldn't read it. "It's alright. You go on."

He tried again. "I'm a kind of messenger, Miss Cleminshaw. They give me money to eat. Standing you to lunch would be part of my work."

She giggled. It was almost sweet. "You might could eat money, Prov, but I'm more partial to food."

"Well let's go on in and get some."

Inside was all dark-wood paneling with a drop ceiling. Pool tables lurked in cones of flickering light at the deeply shadowed end of the bar, while beer signs buzzed all around the room. A case by the door featured some truly mangy roadkill taxidermy. The bikers were shooting pool and watching *The Brady Bunch* on a television above the cue rack. There was a loud argument going on about whether Jan was a lesbian or just weird.

Prov stepped up to the bar and ordered two of the day's specials—fried catfish with okra, black-eyed peas, country fries, and pan frances—and two iced teas. Then they sat at a table near the door, with their backs to the dead armadillos under glass.

"You don't like them Interstates much," said Artie.

Prov shrugged. "Little roads work best for some of us."

"No exits to the Red Dirt Kingdoms?"

"You could say that."

"I ain't complaining, mind you." She traced a massive finger in the pool of sweat from her tea glass. "Didn't have much else to do today. But you're either crazy as a shithouse rat, or the biggest liar since my daddy. Except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Gas gauge on that Chevy ain't budged since we left my place three hours ago. You got some kind of top-secret government miracle juice in your tank?"

He laughed. "Where the Light would I get that?"

"Same place you get those clothes. And your little lists of Secret Heirs."

"There's only one Heir on the list." He was starting to think it might be her after all, man or not.

"Yeah, you got that list and a car that never runs out of gas, and clothes I wouldn't dress a Yankee in."

"Maybe my gas gauge is just broken."

"Is it?"

"No," he admitted.

"Huh."

After lunch, Prov's choice of route became increasingly indirect. He took side roads, county highways, little lanes, even bounced through open rangeland a few times. Artie sat beside him, staring out the window without a word for the twists and turns.

Near sundown, the old Corvair climbed the limestone knob of a hill. The light was long and red, setting the scattered mesquite trees to a sort of flaming glory and casting distended shadows of fence posts. Their own shadow wound back and forth with their spiraling motion across the sparse grass of the hillside.

"You're old, ain't you?" Artie finally said.

Prov laughed softly, concentrating on the complex niceties of his upward driving. "Older than you, certainly."

"No. I mean *old.* Like Europe-old. I been thinking on this for a while. These Red Dirt Kingdoms, they're fairies and elves and shit."

She was *definitely* the Heir. Regardless of that, the Foreman was going to rip him a new one for bringing her home. "That's one way to see it. Though we're all a long way from living Under the Hill."

"You got telephone and cars."

"Among other things."

"So the Armies of Elfland marched through the Industrial Revolution."

The bikers were shooting pool and watching The Brady Bunch on a television above the cue rack.

"You are amazing," he said. Damn, but he was coming to like this girl.

"No. I'm just someone you didn't look too good at the first time you saw me. I told you. I read."

"Lots of people read. They're not amazing."

She put her hand on his thigh again. "So amaze me."

"Abide awhile," he said.

Not much later, the Corvair squeaked to a halt atop the limestone knob. A circle of cedar posts were set where dolmens might have loomed in another time and place. Instead of an altar, there was a fire circle of burnt rocks and ash, a few scorched and dented beer cans lying in the middle. The air smelled of sage and distant cattle and the first cool breeze of evening, rather than the wicker and hawthorn of ancient sacrifice.

Nonetheless, they were at a Gate.

"Moonrise in a couple of hours," he said.

Artie squeezed his thigh. "I got a blanket in my bags."

He looked carefully into her face—broad, homely, eyes not quite level, with a twice-broken nose, acne scars, and a cut on her lower lip.

The face of a woman who would be King.

"If that's what you want."

And so they spread an old Star Wars blanket on the thin grass and paid no mind to the stones that pressed into their backs and thighs as she made love for the first time in her last hours as a mortal woman. Reddish dust rained down in the halls of Elfland deep beneath the earth, and its messenger welcomed their new King home. ☙

Jay Lake lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works on numerous writing and editing projects. His 2009 novels are *Green* from Tor Books, *Madness of Flowers* from Night Shade Books, and *Death of a Starship* from MonkeyBrain Books. His short fiction appears regularly in literary and genre markets worldwide. Jay is a winner of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and a multiple nominee for the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards. ☙

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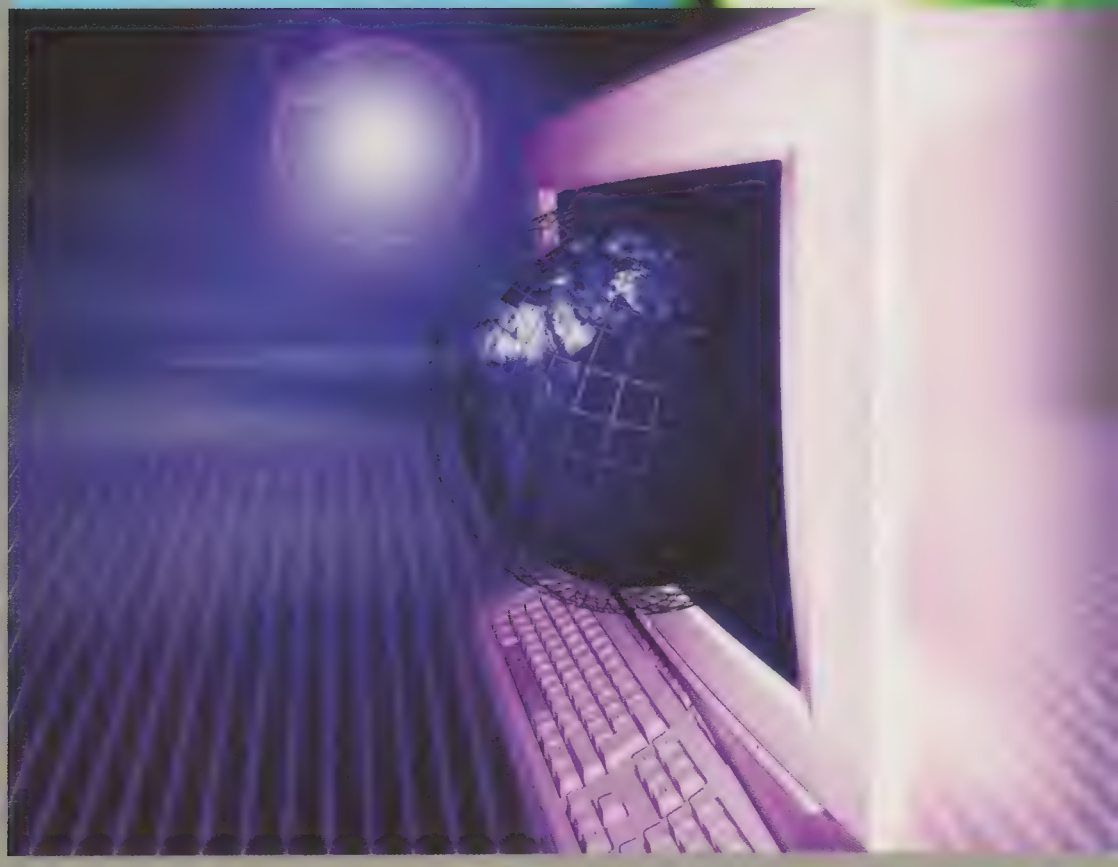

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Bob and the Mermaid

by William R. Eakin
Illustrated by Zak Pullen

In difficult times we take comfort where we can and find strength in the most unlikely places.

...and your old men shall dream dreams

Bob Delashmit caught a mermaid.

Now things like that don't happen a lot down in Redgunk, Mississippi, since as far as I can tell we're about five hundred miles from any ocean. Occasionally, of course, there'll be a mummy-sighting, but usually that's Uncle Joe dicking around in the woods with his knee-bandage-wrapped manikin trying to scare the hell out of some Bobby and Susie necking behind the Consolidated Schools. Or you probably heard all you need to about UFO abductions of, say, Myrtle Ann Kimbriel who came up three months pregnant when she hadn't even seen her husband for a year; or Brother Orin Decker, who claimed he got religion from a race of insects on some revolving flying saucer that also told him the only way in his special case he could kick the DT's was to go back on the sauce every Saturday night with our lead soprano Harriet Pervine in the choir loft of the First Mount Zion Christian Church. There's a lot of swamp gas and a lot of natural hot air oozing up out of the ground in these parts. But the mermaid story is true. I swear it.

"Bob Delashmit is a good man," we all agreed as we generally caroused and guffawed down at Burly Bob's Bar and Grill after Bobby made his way home to Dina Marie. He could have stayed longer and I don't know a soul, man or woman, who would have blamed him for it; but I'll be damned if he ever even once thought seriously about staying. "Just one beer," he always said, even after she got so sick just months into their marriage and again and again for years. "I got things I gotta do."

And we knew what they were: check on that old woman, make sure she knew someone was there to help her over to her plastic toilet seat and into bed. We're talking Bob Delashmit here, the boy back forty years ago who'd been voted Most Likely to Die of STD, the wildest and craziest boy this side of the Mississippi, and certainly the Newman County line—and I am talking about a product of the sixties—so that ole boy knew how to party. That was until his marriage ruined him and he sat down with us that first sickness and said, "I believe I have made a commitment."

"A commitment to what?" we all asked. Because at least half of us there had long been married to high school sweethearts and that sure as heck didn't stop any of us from flopping around with the whores down at Burly Bob's Bar and Grill. "My God," we told him, "it's a way of life." And we said: "She knows what she got into."

And he just said, "I know what I got into, too." She turned out to have the poorest health of anybody we'd ever known. Damn, some of them Redgunk boys can be stubborn.

And so he'd make his way home alone all the way back from the Newman County line to that kudzued muddy property of his that skirts Redgunk Cemetery on the one side and the swamp on the other. And he'd go in through that creaky screen door into the front part of his dark house and yell a "Hi, darlin'," to her, turn on the light, and then kiss her on the forehead to let her know he was there, since she was mostly at that point both blind and nearly deaf. And he'd prop her up a little with the pillow, and sit and hold her hand. And that was after, what, by that time, six or seven surgeries and five major cancers: breast, liver, colon twice, pancreas. The last one they said she wouldn't live through, but

she did, which some of us down at Burly Bob's weren't really sure was the best thing for Bobby, at least. Or her. Or us. But he stuck right in there with her, galdarn him, right in there. And then after he helped her go to the john and clean up and all those things more intimate than I can even tell you about, cause he sure as hell wouldn't tell me about them and I'm his best friend, he put her in bed and sat there and held her hand until she fell asleep, then carefully walked out the creaky screen door in the back and across the muddy, spongy, junky, overgrown ground of his backyard, down a little trail into the woods, and up into the boathouse he and I built about thirty years ago so he and I would have some place to go chug whiskey on fishing days, which was supposed to be every Saturday.

And he usually kept a padlock on the boathouse because he stored his green fishing boat and tackle there, though truth be told you could see right through the cracks between most of those boards we slapped up and most of them were rotting out anyway, like the roof that had so many holes in it he might as well have stored everything outside. Anyway, he'd go back there every night to check on the plastic milk jugs he had floating out in Redgunk swamp—he could check them with a long hook from the back of the boathouse, which was open to the water—and sometimes he'd pull up a good-sized catfish, which he'd immediately nail down to the floor, skin and gut, and take back up to the house to fry. Some nights he'd be frying until the wee hours, have some greasy nighttime nibbles of it, and then head to bed—not to her bed, not Dina Marie's, since it hurt her to have someone, however carefully, jiggle the mattress when he climbed in, but to the bed he'd made himself out of cinderblock-legs, plywood, and a Goodwill used spring-frame that he'd set in their room behind the kitchen.

Now let me remind you this is—well, this was Bobby Delashmit who even if he was, say, maybe sixty-eight, still somehow deep down inside surely was that wild Don Juan I knew at the Consolidated Schools who'd do about anything to skip a day of ninth grade just to go over to visit Betty Pohlmeier's lacy bedroom while her daddy was out at the lumberyards. And it wasn't that he was particularly much of a kiss-and-tell sort of fellow but, you know, boys talk. And if the boys don't the girls do. And ole Bobby had quite a reputation with the girl gossipers—all of which seemed to increase his reputation on its own. Which made it startling to me to see this man, who surely should have been into a second prime or third or fourth, sleeping on a piece of plywood just to take care of that wife of his. Maybe it was love; maybe it was just duty; maybe it was crazy; maybe it was just forgetting what your friends were like and ignoring them for no reason and forgetting how wild and juicy life could be when it didn't smell like disinfectant and chemicals and medicine, and when you didn't spend every waking moment taking care of someone who was pretty much as good as dead, instead of being with your best friends. If I'd been him I'd have been down at Burly Bob's every friggin' night, I guarantee you, drinking a hell of a lot more than just one beer. Well, I was. I was down there every night long before his Dina Marie got sick the third or fourth time; I partied with the boys like a man should and never stopped for no wife, even when I had one, and sometimes I couldn't even make it back home to my own Debbie Jean, falling asleep in the Ford pickup right in Burly Bob's parking lot, and ole Debbie she'd always say, "Delbert, where the hell you been this time?" As if she didn't know; it was a game she had to play: to needle me about it and get all upset so I'd have to ooh and ahh and make all sorts of promises to stop her from crying and caterwauling, and I put up with that all the way up till the time she died of that stroke in her mid-fifties. She had diabetes, probably a hundred pounds too heavy, and died of a stroke, Debbie Jean did.

And over that one beer that he was regular about, that one beer, I'd say to him: "Best thing that ever happened to me, she died of that stroke." And he'd look at me with that strange look in his eyes like a statue's, like some general's, like some vulture's, like something lost and something found, like some god-I-don't-know-what and then he'd refuse that second beer I offered him, even given that flash of weakness I saw in those eyes, too, that moment of *maybe so*. And then he was gone.

All that's to say that it was peculiar the night he did not show up for even the one beer; which got me to thinking that, well, he was sixty-eight years of age, so very well could have had a stroke himself. And then—he didn't show up a second night either. Earl Peldun was there and I said, "Earl, you hadn't heard nothin' from Bobby the past couple days, have ya?" Because Earl sometimes saw him stopping off for a plug of tobacco over at Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store and Gas, which means sometimes they'd stand there for an hour jawing about how the weather might change over the next day or two. And Earl shrugged his shoulders at me and suggested maybe Bobby had had to take Dina Marie down to the Felpham General Hospital again, like he'd had to numerous times before, to be kept over night. And I got to thinking that that was much more likely than Bobby having a stroke—that he, in fact, often stayed down there with her, sleeping in some waiting-room chair.

But then I got to wondering if maybe that ole boy had taken some of the things I'd said to heart, like how I'd been better off since Debbie Jean died of a stroke, and then it came to me that maybe he'd done what I might have done if I'd been in his place and had some youth still, like he did, what I certainly would have done if taking care of Debbie Jean made me limit myself to just one beer with my friends. Maybe he'd finally flipped. The third night I was at Burly Bob's and neither Earl nor anybody else who knew him had seen or heard from Bobby Delashmit, I was sure of it, the murder, I mean, and that Dina Marie was probably sunk out there with the catfish, and I said to Earl that I was going to go find out what was happening up there on the Bobby Delashmit property. But just as I said that, Bobby walked in.

He seemed flustered; he was somehow flushed and pale all at the same time, like a man who'd murdered his wife. Burly Bob handed him a beer; Bobby looked at it a second like a man who had to contemplate something he'd done, and then he opened it and drank off some of the froth. And I said, "Bobby, where the hell you been this time?"

"Home," he said. Not as if he were ever much of a talker anyway. Some fishing-Saturdays we'd go whole hours without a word, just the whiskey pooling in our brain pans.

"How's Dina Marie doing?" I asked.

"Fine." And he took another guilty swallow.

I took one, too, and then I said, "I'm looking forward to doing

some fishing this Saturday."

"Can't do it this Saturday, Delbert."

And then I knew he'd killed his wife, ninety-eight percent sure, at least. I scanned his face for traces of the guilt; and sure enough, I could pick out little patterns of it in the mottled skin of his cheeks.

"We were wondering if you'd had to take Dina Marie down to Felpham for overnight treatment again," I said, testing the plastic milk jugs for a catfish.

"Naw," he said. "She's got a doctor's appointment next week."

"Will she make that appointment, Bobby?"

"Of course she will!" he snapped at me, his face whipping around and his eyes glaring into mine like I'd never seen them before. "Of course she will."

He was hiding it. I knew he was. He was hiding something really dark. "Didn't mean to roil you up, Bobby." And we both turned to our beers in silence until just before he left.

And I said, "Good to see ya. I may come on by this Saturday anyway if that's all right."

And then he looked at me again, like he could kill me, and said, "Don't you dare."

Fact is, he hadn't killed her. I saw him putting her into the car the first part of the very next week to drive her to her doctor's appointment in Felpham. Fact is, Earl said he saw them come back, when he stopped for a piece of chaw, but no conversation, with her waiting in the car. She waved to him. But the fact is, too, that we didn't see him at Burly Bob's; the beer I told you about was the only one I saw him have for over a week. Which made me more suspicious than ever, because I began to think that maybe what was going on was he was *planning* to murder his wife, had to be that. A man don't act suspicious like that unless he's done it or unless he's gonna do it.

It was a week from the Saturday he told me I couldn't come over when I finally decided I ought to and did.

I knocked on the front screen door and no one came. There was a long maw of silence and I figured that he'd killed her, that he was probably back at the boathouse at this very moment trying to get her body to sink down into the muddy catfish waters just past the bobbing milk jugs.

"Bobby?" I called through the screen door, and not an answer, just darkness inside. I bit my lip—what if she was lying there in a pool of blood? I decided I had to go see and I opened the door and walked on in.

There she was in the back room, and when I saw her I stepped back hoping maybe to get out, but she sensed me there and said in that screen-door-creaky voice of hers: "Who's thay-re?"

"Hi, Dina Marie," I said since I now found myself unable to back out and too much into the room to not say something.

"Who is it?"

"Delbert."

"Oh, hi, Dell." She reached a hand that I felt I should take, and did. And even though she was younger than me, I felt like it was an old woman's hand—and something weird happened, because I went suddenly from feeling like I had to hold her hand from politeness to feeling like I had to hold her hand for *her*: for just a moment I felt the kind of suffering she must have been going through, like maybe it was something all of us gotta do one time or another, and how all us one time or another need a warm hand to hold. She needed it and I gave it to her. She said, "Thanks for coming to see me, Dell."

"I—I hadn't seen you for a while." And I sat down holding her hand, kind of like her husband had done for years, her husband who might be plotting her murder. "You're looking good," I lied.

She smiled, acknowledging that it was a lie. She was skin and bones; I knew she couldn't live much longer whether he killed her or not. "Good to see you, Dina Marie." And I meant it. "That no-good husband of yours around?"

"He's out in that boathouse. I thought he'd be out there fishing with you."

"He told me he was busy."

"With what I don't know. But busy, yeah. He's out there a lot, you know. When he thinks I'm asleep, he goes out. Stays with me until he thinks I'm asleep then he goes out to the boathouse. Poor boy. Tell the truth, Dell, I think he's gettin' tired of taking care of me. He ain't never said that, but I can tell he's tired. Truth is, I think he's just tired."

"I don't know no better man," I said.

"I don't either," she said.

We sat in silence for a while, and then I could tell she'd fallen asleep by the fact she started snoring. I looked at her face and—well, to confess it, for the first time I can remember, for some reason, I missed my own Debbie Jean and wished I could hold her hand like this. Wished I had. And for the first time, in that room listening to his wife snore, I felt a pain about it, I couldn't even begin to tell you—how despite everything, despite it being a hell of a lot easier, despite being with all them friends down at Burly Bob's, I missed the girl I'd married, and in fact realized I had missed her for a long, long time someplace deep down and how it hurt no longer having her. I shook myself. If you don't think about something like that it don't hurt; if you do, you get mired down in it. So I shook myself and I whispered to her even though I knew she was asleep: "I'm going to go out and say hi to your husband."

So I set her hand down on her lap, made sure she was still snoring, and then walked through to the back of the house—with only just the passing idea that maybe she wasn't really asleep but just sounded like that when she breathed, and that she watched the world go by a lot, including me, going out the screen door, across the kudzued yard, down the trail, to the door of that boathouse her husband and I had built.

The door was closed but the padlock was gone. I listened through the door to see if I could hear him inside messing with his tackle. I did hear movement, and then something like a splash, like maybe he'd tossed one of those plastic milk jugs back into the water.

"Hey, Bobby!" I called. I tried to open the door and found it would not budge. He had it locked on the inside. "Bobby, it's Dell!"

Something like movement on the other side of the door stopped.

"Bobby, you okay?" There wasn't a lock on the inside of the door. I know; I helped build the place. I tried the door, jiggled it

hard. "Bobby, what the hell you doing in there?"

And when there was no response at all, I stepped over and looked through one of the larger cracks in between the planks of the wall. I could see him alone inside, kneeling at the edge of the floor where it opened out over the water, as if he were checking one of his milk jugs.

"Bobby!" I yelled again as loud as I could, and he turned and saw my fingertips and nose at the crack.

"Oh, oh, hi there, Dell."

He stood. Behind him, in the water, a strange big gray ripple rolled back across the usually still swamp toward the boathouse, as if something submerged swam away from it, a V like the wake of some big catfish swimming off into the unlit and thick and more vegetative parts of Redgunk swamp.

"What the hell you doin' out here?" I demanded as he slid back a bolt lock he'd put on the inside of the door and then opened the door to me.

"You wouldn't understand, Dell," he said.

"Did you—" I pointed out to the gray water, now again perfectly still. "What the hell did you let go?"

"It was the biggest catfish I ever saw, Dell, ever."

I looked at him slanty-eyed. "What'd you let it go for?"

"I told you you wouldn't understand."

I went to the edge of the floor hanging over the water and looked across the swamp and saw something move way over in the moist shadows where the water gave way to mud and a forest of cypress knees. There was a naked woman sitting among the knees.

"Oh, my God," I said. "Bobby, there's a naked woman out—" and then I squinted my eyes, shook my head, and realized she was gone—because either she'd just vanished into the water or I'd merely imagined her when I picked out some big bald cypress knee and thought it was human. Probably that. "Bobby, was there a naked woman sitting over there in the shadows?"

"A mermaid," he said. "It was a mermaid, Dell."

"A what?"

"I told you you wouldn't understand."

"How the hell could I?" And then I looked harder toward the shadows and the cypress knees and the wild and green-blackish swamps past that. It took me a moment to wonder which would be more probable, a giant catfish or a mermaid. Then I flashed on a third option. "You dog. Here we were all your friends worryin' about you and why we hadn't seen you and feeling sorry for you having to take care of your wife all the time, only to find out you've had a woman out here in the boathouse."

"A mermaid, Dell."

I snorted at him, looked him in the eye. "You dog, a flesh-and-blood woman."

"Right, Dell, you think it's probable a flesh-and-blood-normal woman would be swimming out there in the swamp?" He handed me the bottle of whiskey he had stored on his shelf for our Saturdays. "I told you that you wouldn't understand, Dell."

"A woman," I chuckled. And then the cold seriousness of his look made me stop; he motioned and I took a chug of the bottle.

"Sit down for it." he said.

It happened like this, apparently. It was the afternoon, Dina Marie snoozing, her snore loud and harsh even from the backyard. He went to clean up some of the fishing gear out in the boathouse, but something in the water below caught his eye. At first it couldn't have been nothing but the tail of a big dead fish, grayish, maybe a little moldy, floating on the surface of the water.

But then, he told me, it was like seeing something for the first time, like seeing anything for the first time, like seeing the sun for the first time, because there attached to this humongous, outrageously big fish tail—and he realized how big only after a few minutes—was a woman, her back, a woman floating face down in the swamp water, like a dead fish, like a friggin' dead fish!

And then he realized, well, hell, it couldn't be a fish, but that it was a woman, some woman drowned floating face down, stuck partly in the mud; and with a kind of panic he jumped, all of his sixty-eight-year-old bulk plopped down into the mud and water, which was probably about four feet deep there at the boathouse, and he grabbed her up and as he held her up in his arms she splattered and sputtered out and started to breathe; she was limp and dead as a cold dead fish, but her skin, her sweet skin was soft and pliable to his touch, gentle, sweet, tender skin, and her bare chest heaved up, and her head fell back just slightly to show him the most beautiful sleeping face—and hell, the woman looked like she was probably fifty, sixty years old, too, but her skin was so smooth and so lit from within that he felt like life itself was in his arms—and when he told me all this, for some reason, especially when he talked about her face and how beautiful, even if sixty, how like some Madonna's, like some sculpted beautiful sea nymph's it was, I saw my Debbie Jean's face, because that's the way I used to think of her face—at that moment I saw in my imagination my wife's face, how gentle she could be in sleep, how sweet a face could be on even a plumper and older woman so that she looked like a child sleeping—Debbie Jean! I remember how you looked like a child, like a perfection, like life sleeping, like life itself!

And then, he said, the mermaid's eyes opened—clear and green; her long red hair fell back into the water and she trembled all over and closed her eyes again, as if to open them took too much effort. And with an effort equally as big, ole Bobby Delashmit hoisted her from the water back onto the floor of his boathouse and climbed up after her and then peered down at her as she lay unconscious at the edge of the world, of his world, of our world.

He could tell she was older—a wrinkle here and there, wrinkles around her eyes, a tiredness. But at the same time, oh, God, he said, never before was any form so smooth, so gently full, like you'd want to reach out and touch it and you'd be touching the hand of God, to hold it and you'd be holding something divine and so lovely, not for sex but for like a return to comfort, the kind you could never have if you were alive, if you'd been born, if you were in the world. And for a long time looking over her, he realized he hadn't taken a breath—as if his body had given up the desire to breathe but could still live on in the sustained illumination of her presence—and finally he did.

She woke again, those green eyes looking up into his as if they could look through his eyeballs, through his nerve endings,

through his guts, down into the deepest, darkest parts of his soul. And she turned away as if she didn't want to see it—or rather, as if she didn't want him to see through her eyes down into her own soul.

"Are you awake?" he asked. She did not look at him. "Can you understand me? Where the hell did you come from?"

And finally she looked at him again, as if the hell part rang true.

And he looked into her face and whispered this time: "What the hell are you doing in the swamps of Redgunk, Mississippi?"

It was a long time before she could do anything but sit up and stare at him, before she could speak—which she could do—before she could acknowledge that he'd pulled her out of the water. Her voice did come eventually, but it was tired, wracked by something he couldn't even begin to imagine. She said, "I came down the Mississippi."

"Hell you did," he said, doubtfully though not accusingly, then he repeated it as gently as he could speak—"Hell you did"—though the energy of the moment kept welling up inside of him so that he had to stop between every word—or at least so he said. "There ain't no ocean that way, not for a long way. There ain't no ocean north of the Mississippi, not till you get to the Arctic."

She nodded: "I don't really want to talk about it."

Goose pimples ran over her skin at that and he said, "Are you cold? You want some kind of cover?" It wasn't cold, not like the Arctic. It was the hot muggy summer of Mississippi.

"Let me just breathe for a while."

He nodded—and what he told me was that he kept looking, trying not to look, but kept looking at her. "You seem tired," he finally said to her. "You look like you been through something I—"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Can I—can I get you something at least?"

"Food," she nodded.

"Food." And he stood and nodded back, and she reached a hand to his arm, touched it in a way that made his arm virtually illuminate, shine, sing. "I'll get you something—I got—"

"Catfish?" Even tired, her voice was a flower's, like some breath from a spring wood.

He nodded.

"Soup? Fish soup."

"Okay," he said. "I got some filets in the freezer and could make you some. I—I could." She nodded again and he said, "You stay right here. Yeah? Don't go. You—you stay right here?" And she nodded, and he nodded, and she nodded, and he nodded again.

"I—I'll go."

"Say—don't bring a whole host of friends back to gawk at me."

"I won't," he said. "I'm a man of my word." And he was.

He motioned for her to stay put, and then walked back to the house, got those filets out of his ice box, and started making the soup. That's when, he said, he knew Dina Marie was awake. Oh, she was snoring, but it was really just her harsh breathing—and he realized then that she never really slept, not really, not like healthy people do, that she was always, always, always in some half-sleep, in some tiredness, in some state of mind that was like not really being alive, that was like being unable to live but also unable to let go, not wanting to let go but not wanting to stay, either.

And his heart thudded against his chest, thinking what she was like, what life was like here, what it had been like doing the things he knew he had to do, doing the things he had a duty and a commitment to do. And he left the fish soup warming and went and sat with her, with Dina Marie, and held her hand, thinking how hard this suddenly was. Harder than ever before. She said, "You making me some lunch, ain't ya, Bobby?"

And he said, truthfully, "Yes, baby, I am." Mostly truthfully.

And when the soup was done he went very slowly and methodically and got her a bowl and took it into her room and sat with her, and helped her spoon by spoon to eat it, until she was completely done and until she closed her eyes. And only then did he take the soup out of the pan for the mermaid. Only when his wife was asleep in the sleep she could have did he take the ladle and pour out some for the mermaid. And his hands shook doing it.

He looked from the soup he'd ladled into the mermaid's bowl to the room where Dina Marie lay snoring. And the difference between the two cut into him: between the harsh, hard, aching, suffering, dying woman he'd given so much of himself to and committed himself to, and the living, sinuous, sensuous creature washed up onto his boathouse floor, through whom, for the first time in years, he'd begun to feel something like *want*. He closed his eyes and refused to think any more of that comparison, but instead took the bowl and hurried outside.

The mermaid sat up and took a spoonful of soup, on her own; she cradled the bowl in her hand and as the soup went down, seemed to gain color, warmth, life under her skin.

"So what the hell are you doing in the swamps of Redgunk, Mississippi?" he asked her again finally, this time sitting down across from her and letting his feet hang over the edge of the house so that his feet almost touched the water, trying to look more out toward the swamp and less at her.

"I was escaping."

"Escaping what?" He looked back at her now and was surprised to see that with a bit more soup in her, the wrinkles in her face had smoothed away. He wondered about wrinkles in other places on her body and for a brief second he allowed his eyes to follow the wonder—and then he looked away quickly—it was hard not to look all over her, with—well, you know that ole boy was starting to feel something deep down inside, something he hadn't let himself feel for a long, long time.

"I was in an aquarium, a private one," she said quickly, fully aware of his sudden interest in her. Fully. "A big one, in a rich man's mansion, in St. Louis, near the river."

"Did he catch you at sea?" He did not look back at her. "Did he kidnap you?"

"No," she sipped from the bowl now. "I went there with him. I wanted to go with him. I wanted it."

"I don't think I—I don't think I understand a damned bit what's going on around here." Now he looked at her again, only this time in the face. "Ain't mermaids supposed to prefer open water and like die if they're taken captive? Don't y'all prefer life in some undersea castle or somethin'? Try to avoid humans?"

"There's lots of things they say about mermaids that aren't true."

"And don't you—don't y'all die if you're too long outta the ocean? Don't you—"

"You saw me, didn't you? Very nearly dead in your swamp?"

"Looks to me like you're coming back to life. That soup's doing you good. You're gettin' some color, some energy. I can tell. I'd a thought you'd had to have been—what? I always heard you had to be in the open sea to start getting some life back, that you became a woman when you came out of the water but only had a little bit of time to get back, and if you didn't do that in time you'd never be able to get back at all and you'd turn fully human and just get old and suffer and die like everybody else in the universe. And that's what you been doing, ain't it?"

"Yeah. Well, anyway, just about everything you've ever heard about mermaids is—probably untrue. Everything except—" He was looking at her eyes, and he admitted to me that they again kept sinking down to her smooth, sweet body, because her body was more and more alive, more and more alluring, more and more undeniably desirable as he watched and desired. "Everything except how—how insatiable they are."

"How what?"

"How what?" I asked him.

"She said—" and here Bobby paused and looked at me like he was going to reveal something so personal about himself that he would kill me if I told anyone else. "She said mermaids are insatiable. That mermaids never stop wantin'. Never."

"Wantin' what?" I asked, then stopped myself, knowing full well what he was talking about. "Oh, my God. You mean to tell me you had a woman here, in this very spot, telling you she was in—insatiable?" I took a big long slug of the whiskey. "God dang, what I wouldn't give for—"

"It wasn't like that, Dell. Her face was so sweet. But I ain't never wanted nothing so bad."

"And so did you…?"

"Did I what?" He looked offended.

"Well, you know. You can't tell me with your eyes rolling all over her and with all you been through, with all you been deprived of, here you are sitting in a world with an insatiable mermaid, and you didn't—"

"Stop it, would ya?"

"Why? So—" I looked out back across the swamp. "She's still around, ain't she? You're goin' to. You're going to be with her. I can tell it. I can feel it in the air. Did I interrupt you?" Then I looked into his face and said, "Wait. This was about a week ago. You been out here with her—"

"I ain't touched her once, Dell. I got a wife back here in the house. I ain't touched the mermaid once, even though I know I could."

"Are you nuts? And—okay, so you ain't touched her. But that desire's been growin', ain't it?"

"I kept bringing her food, she kept getting stronger; I put a lock on the door so she could—keep any intruders away."

"You mean you? So she could keep you away."

"I knock before I come in. And she—she swims here, and is getting stronger, and every day, more and more not just stronger but—"

"Sexier. More lusty."

"Yeah," he nodded. He had a terrified look in his eye.

"You're tempted. You're more than tempted, ain't ya?"

"I—I keep feeling more and more and more and more—alive." And this time he took a really big slug of the whiskey. "Alive, Dell."

"Yeah," I nodded. "I see that."

"She wants me. She wants me to go with her."

I gazed into his eyes. I saw: the young fellow I went to school with, the one all the girls loved, the one Betty Pohlmeier used to take to that lacy bedroom, the one Angela Helmert was always taking dancing, paying for his meals, fawning over him with her big inheritance from the family down in Natchez. The one who finally desired and loved most of all that girl who married him. I saw that friend of mine so full of life you could imagine him jump up like a Russian dancer and hurl himself across the room and up over the rooftops, flying and laughing and crowing like Peter Pan, some young dancer who grasped hard and held on and twirled, with the forms of life—all life, plant and animal and angelic, looking like young girls in white dresses turning and laughing and raising their faces to the ecstatic sun. I hadn't seen that man in those eyes for years.

"You know what she says?" he said, with the gleam in his eye. "She says it ain't the food or just taking time to heal here that makes her warmer and livelier and more and more insatiable. It ain't the food. It's desire itself. Maybe what I feel for her! She says she feels it and it brings her back to life, she feels it in her marrow. It makes her live!"

And I could see he felt it, too.

"And you're going with her, Bobby? You're going with her."

His eyes stayed gleaming like a madman's, like some poet's full of an infinite longing that—that was met, that was reached, that was fulfilled in itself, by its own existence. I could see him, swimming off with her through the mud channels of the swamps, the mud clearing off leaving strong, clear currents of water, tubes of water giving their strength to the great Mississippi, the kind that give you their power when you let go, let go and go curling, twirling with them, like that man and his mermaid growing stronger with the current, growing whole, waking up, and every muscle in his body reviving, bursting out of their old decrepitude, the man himself bursting the limits not just of age but of being human, even, so that he no longer had to follow the old laws of gravity or the old laws of having to breathe air or the old laws of an old world that said he was committed or that he had a duty or that he had chosen a duty and had to live it.

"You're going with her?" And I looked into his face, his eyes, his soul. And I saw the tube-sinews of Mississippi water open out into curling waves that splashed into the ocean, into a wild water spirit so big that it encompassed the Earth; I saw her and him open themselves out, like they'd become water, too, open wide under the glittering ocean, and then like great fish splash and flash downward, deep, deeper, those two, the man and the mermaid; I saw me, too, with them, divesting myself of all limits, of stupidity and humility and crankiness and the wired-dry body I'd left behind, because I saw myself, too, swimming with him and her down down down into the dark crevice, swimming through

and past brilliant dances of illuminated undersea creatures and then revolving circles of dancing singing wild mermaid women with their gentle fingers reaching to us and pulling us downward, drawing us into the center and the heart and into life itself.

And then I realized what he was trying to tell me.

"You've got to go!" I snapped at him. "You can't not go." And I don't know why I said it, or why I said it with so much vehemence. As if—if I could not go, at least he could. There was a chance at least for one of us, one of our kind.

"She told me," he said, "that she first came ashore on some island off of Thailand or someplace like that. Fell in love with a dark, beautiful fisherman, and couldn't take her hands off of him. They lived in the wildness, in the dance, in the lovemaking of a cave, and as she told me of their loving, Dell, I tell ya, I got more and more insane with it, more and more knew what I wanted, so badly—to dance with her, too! To hold her in that cave! I feel it. I feel it all through every bit of me."

"I feel it, too, Bobby. I feel it, too."

"And after him there was another, she opened to, slept with, sweated with, desired, desired above all else, and then countless others, other men on other shores, as if desire could outlast every man, like she was ravenous and wild, like she had to hold them and nuzzle her face into their shoulders, one man for the whole of his life after another for the whole of his, and desiring more: to feel their pulse, to taste their sweat, to feel their hands and bodies and the whole of their lives, their land lives, and then to hold them, hold them, hold them, hold us… God, do you feel how alive?"

I gasped.

"And even this man in St. Louis—she went with him, stayed in his pool, his bed, his life, his aquariums, and she said, she told me, 'Do you see how infinite desire can be? What an infinite delight and hurt? How I would have stayed there and shriveled and died for the desire?' And I told her: 'Oh, God, yes, oh, God.' Oh, Dell, I—" and he took another drink from the whiskey, only this time I had to stop him forcibly from draining the bottle.

"And how she—on her way home, thinking she could escape it and stop it and return to the depths—how she came here, dying in the swamps when the desire she wanted to leave seemed to be dying, and found me and my desire and how she can take me, have me, how she can take one of us, only one of us, me, with her? How she came here, as if I called her, as if something inside'a me called her?"

I knew. I could hear the something in me calling her, too.

"Do you feel, Dell, how alive I am? How alive she is with desire? How alive we are?"

It was so much I couldn't even speak a response.

Instead, I heard a splash. I thought I saw some form dip through and swim around the cypress knees across from us.

"She's coming," he said.

"I wanna see her."

"I want you to get outta here, I want you to leave so she can come out. I'll tell you about it someday."

"You gonna tell me about it from the bottom of the ocean?"

"I mean it, Dell. Get on outta here."

Then again I had this weird suspicion that he wasn't going. Why the hell not? "No. You gotta tell me—from the bottom of the ocean. You understand? What if only one of us could do it, what if only one human being could do it? You gotta! You gotta go! Promise me you will."

"Get out, friend."

I tried to see her in the gray water swimming closer. When I tried to think over what he was thinking, I could only think of—of my own Debbie Jean. I could see only Debbie Jean's face, and I felt for the first time the *real* power, the real undersea currents of an infinite longing, that I too had: the kind we have to live with, we have to—the kind that, no matter how hard we or the mermaids try to escape it or drown it out, we have to live and die with, because it is life itself. The mermaid had got herself caught in an aquarium, for god's sake, chasing after it. And here, here on the way to the deepest ocean, the deepest parts of the deepest galdarned ocean, she'd tried to escape it and still found herself stopping for another man in Redgunk, Mississippi, even probably knowing she could never have him—because why? *Because* she could never have him? Like I could never again have my Debbie Jean?

Oh, my God, I felt it, looking at that door as he pushed me out just a little and I found myself on the wrong side of it. Listening to her splashing out. Listening through the door to muffled talk and to—what? To life? To her comment that she'd known all along she could not have him and it was that desire that lived in her and maybe always would? To a single kiss, maybe, on his cheek?

A splash, a single splash. And not another.

He talked about Dina Marie after her funeral when we went to sit with a whiskey bottle as friends, maybe six months later. He said she loved his fish soup. "It makes me feel better," she'd said. Not the mermaid, but Dina Marie.

And I don't suppose he was ever more alive than when he brought it to her, or her either. They'd always been alive, I suppose, but the mermaid helped him see it—and he talked to me about her from the deepest, darkest parts of the ocean, illuminated with dance, there in the heart of Mississippi, Redgunk, on the edge of the swamp, where I felt it, too, where something like the long current of water, the long strand of muscle and heart-tissue reached out like a river to the sea, reached out as a longing that can only go on infinitely when you let it go, reached out and touched at some far distant end my Debbie Jean and his sweet Dina Marie to make and keep them really alive; to make me and him, sitting at the swamp edge with our whiskey and those plastic milk jugs bobbing up and down, really and genuinely alive.

She loved the fish soup, he told me. "It makes me feel better," she said.

She wouldn't get better, he knew. She was close to dying.

But he said: "It makes me feel better, too." ☙

William R. Eakin's fiction has appeared in over seventy publications, including his award-winning story collection *Redgunk Tales* (Invisible Cities) and a horror-satire novel, *Tick Hill* (Yard Dog Press). He is currently completing negotiations on a multi-volume book series collecting all the stories set in his Redgunk, Mississippi (watch for announcements!). "Bob and the Mermaid" is the 7th appearance of a Redgunk tale in *Realms of Fantasy*. ☙

Talking with

Lee Moyer, Renaissance Man

by Mia Nutick

It's not a smart career move to say that, yes, I sculpt and I carve and I write and design games and collaborate on all sorts of other things.

If you're interested in fantasy art, you may be a fan of Brian Froud, Amy Brown, Frank Frazetta or Charles Vess. These artists are all known for their distinctive styles and large bodies of highly recognizable work. But if you're interested in fantasy art, you might also be a fan of Lee Moyer — you just might not realize it.

I recently visited with Moyer, a dynamic and genial man who lives in a charming 100 year old house in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and collaborator, photographer Annaliese Moyer. In a brightly lit studio, surrounded by books and whimsical fantasy and science fiction toys, he spends his days creating a wide range of amazing images for book covers, comics, games and commercial ventures.

Moyer's official biography states "born in 1964 (in Laramie, Wyoming), Lee moved constantly as a child — from the Black Hills of South Dakota to Arlington, Virginia — and read voraciously. Libraries in towns large and small provided him inspiration from many of the 20th century's great illustrators — Howard Pyle, the Leyendecker Brothers, Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, NC Wyeth, Charles Dana Gibson and John R. Neill His working life has taken him from apprenticeship to Carl Lundgren to work as Resident Illustrator at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History to the creation of book covers for such notable authors as Marion Zimmer Bradley, Michael Swanwick, Iain M. Banks, and Kim Newman. And because he works with diverse methods, from painting to digital graphics, and his creative ideas are seemingly endless, his art may pop up just about anywhere.

With his experience at the Smithsonian to draw on, it's not surprising that Moyer has an incredible eye for realistic detail. For example, his female warrior figures are athletic, stunning visions of feminine power — no wasp-waisted, top heavy, puerile teenage daydream material here! His Crimson Corsair (done for Wizards of the Coast) or his Catwoman (with Pete Woods for DC comics) are women who exude power, confidence and danger from lithe figures, anatomically perfect in muscle and pose. Likewise, when Moyer draws an animal, be it a dragon or a dog, the creature comes to life through vibrant natural detail. Clearly his time at the Smithsonian and the National Zoo was well spent, not just for Moyer but for the visiting public.

Moyer explains how he came to gain his vast experience in natural art: "I went and started drawing every single week in the Natural History museum, and eventually an area called the Naturalist Center, more than forty thousand natural history objects that you can touch, turn, move, ideal for illustrators and naturalists. . . They asked me if I would be a docent, . .and I was a docent there for ten years and I did really disparate things like worked at the Science Summer School program in the D.C. public schools, which was wonderful, and the Fiesta Musicale, as the guest artist at the National Zoo. . .[There were] draw-ins, where people would come from surprisingly long ways sometimes to come to the Smithsonian to draw from the collections and I was one of the artist hosts that would talk to people about careers in

art and that kind of thing, and I learned a great deal about nine-banded armadillos and penguins and all manner of things that I had no idea about. It was fabulous."

While he got his start in drawing and in oil painting, early in his career Moyer realized the potential of mixing computer graphics with painting and drawing, and has been a proponent of using any and all media ever since. The effects he produces with his techniques are marvelous; richly colored, vibrant, and intensely detailed. As computers and software have improved and gained almost magical powers over the years, so has Moyer's ability to use them to brilliant effect in his artwork. Reminiscing about his first book cover, he explains "You know, my first book cover may have been very much like one of my most recent book covers. I did the cover of a book called The Geography of Unknown Lands, which was a fabulous short story collection by Michael Swanwick . . . that led to him last year asking for my return engagement and I got to do his 25-year career retrospective, The Best of Michael Swanwick (Subterranean Press), and its cover — the difference being that the first cover I did on my fancy new computer as it was then, with 40 mgs of RAM. I was a God at 40 mgs of RAM. Everyone else only had 32 mgs of RAM, and mine went to 11 — I had to literally build the cover in quadrants because, if I had done it all at once, it would have frozen — shut my computer down — and only at the very end did I put it all together, and I thought my computer was going to die. Strangely, enough time has passed that the new cover was like magic. I never feared for my life or my computer's life at all."

With the great advent of wholly computer generated artwork, it's sometimes difficult for artists to capture the human body and facial expressions in realistic detail. Sometimes the viewer sees an image which, though otherwise lovely, seems just a little bit . . . off. Moyer often solves this problem with the help of his wife and collaborator Annaliese.

"In this case, when I work with Annaliese, perhaps most often I'll make my drawing, I'll know exactly what I need, and then we'll get a model. The model will come over, Annaliese will shoot reference — this is very much what Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parrish did back in the day, very, very similar, but they weren't married to their photographer. In my case, good for me, because I don't have to do the work and she has all of this amazing expertise in things like lighting and so forth . . . But we'll take the reference pictures and it will often be as many as four hundred photos and sometimes a photo will

surprise me, and I'll say 'oh my drawing was inadequate and I need to change it in these ways.' Most often, I will take one, sometimes as many as twelve, of her reference photos of a single figure and use individual photos to show me exactly the turn of that knuckle or where a shadow might fall on a pleat, that kind of thing. And often people think my work is straight photography, that I've used Photoshop to take photographs and make them, you know, airbrush them, whatever that is. And when I show people sometimes the before and after, it's really delightful to watch their eyes get really wide and their jaws drop. It's great."

Of course, Moyer takes great personal interest in the work he's asked to do. When it comes to book covers, he very much prefers to read the work first. Unlike some illustrators, he would rather not work from a synopsis if at all possible. In fact, he's such a voracious reader and lover of books that he's had to limit himself to work-related reading only. "I realized," he laughs, "that short of a 12-step program or an intervention of some kind, that I really, really had a problem and my solution is perhaps draconian, but I feel that it does the best for me and the best for the authors whose books I illustrate, and that is I only allow myself to read novels and short story collections for my work. And because I love reading so much, it is a guarantee, a solid guarantee, that when I need to illustrate, say, an Iain Banks novel, I don't care how long it is. In fact, the longer it is the better, the more I like it because I can sit there and be just as nerdy and obsessive as I like and yes . . . I read every single thing I can. Occasionally I will work for a publisher who can't get me a galley or who is unwilling to do that, and that makes me sad because I could have read that book." Moyer advises, "Always read the book, and always read every part of the book if you can because there may be some tiny piece, some little thing that can become a leitmotif, and that can make a cover interesting or dynamic or dramatic in a way that, if you skipped that paragraph, you just might not get . . . And, if you have an opportunity to talk to the author, or to work on a piece where you know the author is involved in the art direction, it's so much better. [For instance] I have had the great pleasure of exchanging mail with Kim Newman, author of Anno Dracula, one of my favorite books, and really trying to figure out the identity of his major characters and ending up being able to do little versions of Peter Cook and getting some inside dirt that I won't share

about certain of his other characters."

Moyer has often been asked to bring his skills to the table as an artistic director, frequently for games both on and offline (he numbers Star Chamber and Sanctum among his credits), and recently worked on the redesign of the Dungeons and Dragons Fourth Edition. His dedication to detail is an asset when art directing, as well. He says "If I'm working on someone else's game, then I need to do whatever they deem wise. Having just helped redesign the fourth edition of Dungeons and Dragons . . . I like to think that I've given them some really lovely motifs and things that they didn't have before, and hopefully they feel the same way . . . when I can do something like the new map for Eberron for D&D, where I can do a map that's a yard wide and say 'you realize this forest is 400 miles across and you haven't given it a name, wouldn't that be lovely? Wouldn't that bring value to the players? Here are the new holy symbols for D&D, rather than just showing them to the players, wouldn't it be lovely to show them in situ on an object to make it real for the players.' It's just how much value can I add at any given point, that's what I'm always trying to do."

Adding value is indeed one of Moyer's talents, and because his work is so diverse, he is able to add value to many things

which are dear to his heart. A theater buff, he's done poster work for numerous productions, among them plays produced by the Northwest Children's Theater and the Third Rail Repertory Theatre in his own city of Portland. He's also indulged his love of H.P. Lovecraft with poster work for the H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival held annually in Portland, and an amazing book full of art examining Lovecraft films.

"I did a great many H.P. Lovecraft images from the time I was in high school, and I did scads of them for the card game Mythos. . . I spent really the better part of a year art directing the book Lurker in the Lobby, a Guide to the Cinema of H.P. Lovecraft (Night Shade Books). [I was] very pleased that so many really incredibly talented people donated work for the book — my friend Paul Komoda, William Stout, Mike Mignola, Bernie Wrightson, just some really amazing talent . . . we used Mr. Komoda's work at the start of each chapter and he let me have my way with them to make them apt for what we were doing, and I created — in some cases almost out of whole cloth — photographic introductions to each film, some of which are so obscure and so hard to get . . . it was such a lot of work. It was really a labor of love . . ."

Viewing Moyer's art gives one the feeling that everything he does is actually a labor of love. He realizes, however, that having such a wide range of interests and talents can sometimes be a handicap. Because he works in varying media and styles, it's likely that no single piece of his work will be picked up and heavily merchandised. He says that "There are absolutely beautiful images by my contemporaries that I'm seeing and just thinking 'oh, why don't I get to draw that character? That's fantastic. I would so love to do a series like that, wouldn't that be amazing?' But because I've been very — what's the word to use here — because my projects are so disparate from one another, I think there is a perception amongst the publishers that I don't actually have a style . . . I just get to have so much fun designing what I think the book needs and I think it is possible that I shouldn't perhaps display so much range, it's probably not good for my career, but I can't help it.

I think that there's . . . this largely artificial separation between design and illustration. I think it's even more straight jacketing than that, that there's a reason they're called Renaissance men because they died out in the Renaissance. It's not a smart career move to say that, yes, I sculpt and I carve and I write and design games and collaborate on all sorts of other things, because again, if someone wants to hire an artist, why do they want someone who does these other things?"

It's obvious from his varied career, many awards, and the list of highly respected artists that Lee Moyer collaborates with (among them Michael Kaluta, Stephen Hickman, and Dave Stevens) that many people do. Currently Moyer is working on a collaboration that brings him full circle, back to his time as a young artistic hopeful: he's doing the color renderings for the new IDW release of Elaine Lee and Michael Kaluta's Starstruck collection. "At the moment," he says, "I guess the thing that I'm most excited about is that I'm working with my heroes and good friends, Elaine Lee and Mike Kaluta, on Starstruck, available I think in September . I've loved this comic for 25 years, and I wrote a note back in my struggling lack-of-skills days, suggesting I'd be happy to help out with this in some way. Twenty-five years later, I'm helping out. And it's just . . . so exciting to get to work with Mike Kaluta's art on a daily basis and yeah. It's wonderful."

It's likely that this modern Renaissance man will continue contributing an incredible array of art across the spectrum of fantasy markets, so whether you're looking at a book cover, reading a graphic novel, or playing a game, keep an eye out and you'll find Lee Moyer. ∞

VN THE RABBIT-HOLE
DRINK ME
LEWIS CARROLL
ge, but the wise little Alice was not
look first, she said, 'and see wheth-
e had read several nice little histo-
nt and eaten up by wild beasts and
ause they would not remember the
them: such as, that a red-hot poker
and that if you cut your finger
bleeds; and she had never forgotten
ed 'poison,' it is almost cer-
ou, sooner or later.
oison, so Alice ventured to
ct, a sort of mixed flavour
ey, toffee, and hot but-
soon finished it off.
feeling!' said Alice; 'I must be shutting up like a tel
scope.'
indeed: she was now only ten inches high, and her
p at the thought that she was now the right size for
little door into that lovely garden. First, however,
a few minutes to see if she was going to shrink any f
a little nervous about this: 'for it might end, you know
herself, 'in my going out altogether, like a candle. I
could be like then?' And she tried to fancy what the
like after the candle is blown out, for she could not
ever having seen such a thing.

IX
AMBERCON
NORTHWEST

Books

Paul Witcover
Matt Staggs

Joe Abercrombie's novel *The Blade Itself*, which kicked off his well-received First Law trilogy, was one of the best first novels of 2007. Now he's back with a stand-alone fantasy that's even better, the aptly titled *Best Served Cold* (Orbit, New York, hardcover, 512 pp., $24.99, ISBN: 978-0-316-04496-7).

War has been raging in the land of Styria for decades when the novel opens, with Grand Duke Orso slowly and relentlessly extending his dominion and uniting the squabbling petty fiefdoms under his iron rule. Now, thanks to Monza Murcatto, a mercenary general in his employ, and the efforts of her army, the Thousand Swords, victory is within his grasp. Or, rather, the grasp of his star general, whose popularity with the people has made the duke wonder how long he will retain the crown if he allows Monza to win it for him. Anticipating her betrayal, Orso strikes first, leaving her for dead....

But Monza doesn't die. With the aid of a mysterious benefactor, and driven by her own burning need for vengeance, Monza forces her crippled body back to a semblance of functionality. And then she sets out methodically to exact a terrible revenge not only against Orso, but six other men who witnessed or participated in the bloody double-cross that nearly left her dead.

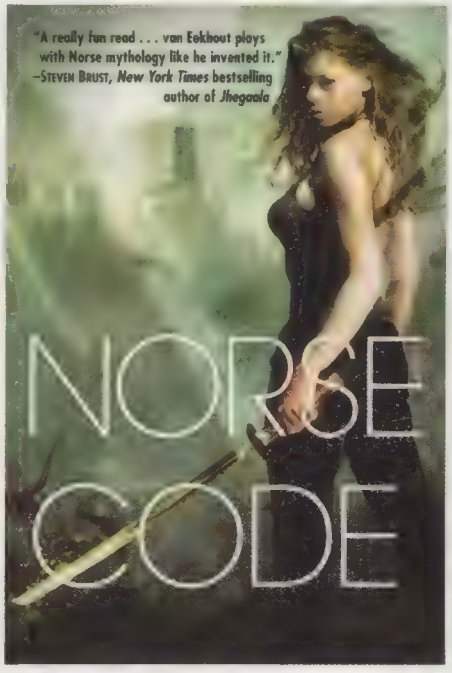
She enlists a small company of dangerous men and women, among them a Northern barbarian named Shivers, who has come south to civilization in order to become a better man: Morveer, an arrogant poisoner and misanthrope; a mass-murderer and semi-autistic savant named Friendly; and Cosca, a drunken mercenary captain whose command was once usurped by Monza. Morveer and Cosca are especially fine comic creations, but Friendly, though a minor character, is something more: a psychopath who is both believable and likeable.

Once Monza and company begin their killing spree—which although targeted specifically at seven men proves less discriminating in practice than in theory—they attract Orso's notice, and he dispatches an assassin in their wake: a man whose skill in hand-to-hand combat seems—though it is never explicitly stated—magical.

Abercrombie's bantering, ironic tone and fascination with the cross and double-cross did put me in mind of Scott Lynch's work, but I was also reminded of the mechanistic, cold-blooded revenge fantasies of K. J. Parker. One thing Abercrombie shares with these writers is a refreshingly realistic, emotionally detached approach to battle scenes, especially personal combat. *Best Served Cold* affords Abercrombie many opportunities to showcase his considerable skills in this area. When you read as much fantasy as I do, you appreciate a writer who has the restraint to depict the frenzied chaos and bloody confusion of battle in all its beauty, terror, and black humor. And when, as with Abercrombie, that approach extends beyond the battlefield, you know you've found a writer to follow.

Greg van Eekhout's short fiction has often featured dark but ultimately hopeful updatings of mythic themes, as in the Nebula-nominated "In the Late December," wherein Santa Claus does battle with entropy itself. In his fast-paced and entertaining first novel, *Norse Code* (Bantam, New York, mass market paperback, 296 pp., $7.99, ISBN: 978-0-553-59213-9), van Eekhout applies this formula to Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods.

Van Eekhout's initial conceit is a cool one: in the modern world, the Norse gods are using DNA analysis to track down human descendants of Odin and recruit these men and women—whether they like it or not—into the Einherjar, the army of warriors who endlessly feast, fight, die, and are reborn in Valhalla in preparation for the day they will join Odin and the other Aesir in their final, doomed battle against the giants, the treacherous Loki, and gigantic monsters like the wolf Fenrir and the Midgard serpent, at the end of which, or so it has been reliably foretold, the old order will perish and a new heaven


"A really fun read . . . van Eekhout plays with Norse mythology like he invented it."
—Steven Brust, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Jhegaala*
NORSE CODE

Greg van Eekhout

and earth will be born.

In the old myth, Valkyrie shield maidens would appear to the spirits of newly dead warriors notable for their courage and fierceness; these happy few would be whisked away to Valhalla. But van Eekhout's Valkyries are no longer content to wait for likely warriors to die. They track down anyone with the remotest connection to Odin and kill them, harvesting their souls for the battle to come.

Freshly minted Valkyrie Kathy Castillo, now known as Mist, has moral objections to this approach. But when she tries to spare a candidate, one Andrew Hoover, whose abject cowardice makes plain his unsuitability for recruitment, her on-the-job trainer and minder, a grizzled Einherjar named Grimnir, steps in and kills the hapless man, sending his soul to the torments of Helheim. In attempting to protect Hoover, Mist winds up killing Grimnir. Well, not *killing*, exactly, because Grimnir, like all Einherjar, can't die until Ragnarok, so Mist knows that he will return to life and heal from his wounds—but even so it's a bad move, because when he does recover, he's going to come after her. Even worse, in striking him down, she's set herself against her sister Valkyries, who are led by Radgrid, a no-nonsense woman determined to prove the prophecies wrong and come out on top at Ragnarok by hook or by crook.

Tormented by guilt, Mist decides to travel to Helheim and rescue Hoover. And while she's at it, she's also going to ransom the soul of her sister, Lilly, who died in the same senseless attack that put an end to Mist's former life. But while Mist, in the moments after death, was chosen for Valkyrie duty, Lilly—in Mist's opinion, a much more worthy candidate—was rejected and sent to the goddess Hel's domain.

Only one living person has ever entered Helheim and returned: the Aesir Hermod, one of Odin's sons, who was dispatched long ago to retrieve his brother Balder, slain through the machinations of Loki. Though he failed to get either Balder, or their brother Höd, the sad sack whom Loki tricked into killing Balder, back from Hel, Hermod at least got himself out alive. So Mist sets out to find Hermod, figuring that he can help her in her quest.

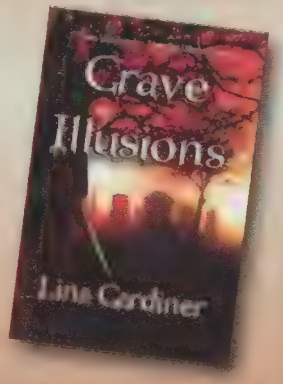
Hermod, however, has no desire to make a return trip to Helheim. In fact, he doesn't want to have anything to do with his fellow Aesir at all. But an uncanny encounter with a wolf pup on Venice Beach involves the reluctant hero in what seems to be a plot to set Ragnarok in motion before its time. Meanwhile, a recovered Grimnir tracks Mist down—but rather than hauling her back to Radgrid, he agrees to help her find Hermod. This accomplished, the three unlikely allies—plus Hermod's dog, Winston—set off for Helheim.

Up until this point, *Norse Code* is rather clunky, with a lot of back story and infodumping as van Eekhout maneuvers

Jabril
by D. B. Reynolds
Book Two in the Vampires in America Series

Running from L.A. and its seductive Vampire Lord, Raphael, Cyn sees the Houston job as a welcome refuge, a place to get away and heal her broken heart. But Texas will be no vacation. For in Jabril Karim, Cyn will confront a true enemy, one who will go to any lengths to satisfy his lusts, enrich his coffers and expand his power.

Grave Illusions
by Lina Gardiner
Book One of the Jess Vandermire, Vampire Hunter series



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Use coupon code 20OFF at checkout

his characters into position and kicks his plot into motion. But from here on out, the action is fast and furious, filled with set pieces of skillfully orchestrated violence in Hel, Asgard, and Midgard.

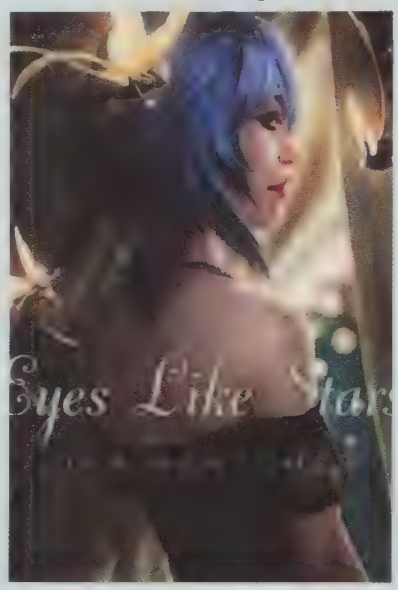
There are advantages and disadvantages to yoking a novel so explicitly to a well-known myth; the myth provides structure, momentum, direction, and familiarity, but it can also limit an author's freedom… and that of his characters. Van Eekhout mostly avoids the downside. His main characters are brave and likable, defusing moments of horror or hopelessness with self-deprecatingly ironic humor, and while the romance that develops between Mist and Hermod will surprise no one, it is deftly handled. Because certain characters are attempting to force Ragnarok into being by following the letter, if not the spirit, of the old prophecies, van Eekhout has a lot of opportunities to play around with Ragnarok canon, and he takes apart the puzzle pieces and rearranges them in clever, satisfying ways. This slam-bang adventure story remains true to its mythic roots even while transplanting them into fertile new soil.

The same cannot be said of Mark Chadbourn's new novel, *World's End* (Pyr, Amherst, New York, trade paperback, 416 pp., $15.98, ISBN: 978-1-59102-739-3), the first in the Age of Misrule trilogy,

Young Adult Fantasy Books

By Michael Jones

Eyes Like Stars, by Lisa Mantchev, Feiwel and Friends, July 2009



Beatrice Shakespeare Smith has never known any home beyond the Theatre Illuminata, a magical place where every character to ever appear in a play can be found. Her best friends are a quartet of Shakespearian fairies, her constant nemesis is Ariel from *The Tempest*, and she has a crush on a pirate boy. Unfortunately, she's just been told to shape up and stop making trouble, or to leave the Theatre forever. In her quest to prove she belongs there, she'll uncover an insidious plan to destroy the Theatre, investigate her own dramatic origins, and attempt to direct her very own play. But will she earn her standing ovation, or is it curtains for her career? Filled with literary whimsy and intrigue, this story brings the magic of the stage to life with great delight. The Theatre is a fascinatingly strong setting, populated with a rich variety of characters and plenty of potential. Bertie herself definitely deserves another turn in the spotlight. Mantchev can take a bow; her first novel, Book 1 of the Theatre Illuminata Trilogy, is a crowd-pleaser.

Dull Boy, by Sarah Cross, Dutton Books, May 2009

Gifted with the powers of super-strength and flight, Avery struggles to put them to good use without giving away his secret identity or becoming any more of an outcast than he already is. Things seem to improve when he meets other teenagers also possessing superhuman powers, but personality conflicts threaten to tear them apart, especially after the beautiful, manipulative Cherchette attempts to recruit the group for her own mysterious purposes. As Avery and his new friends attempt to find their own place in the world, they tangle with Cherchette and discover the secrets behind their powers. Cross's debut is a strong one, with a cast of memorable characters and a thoughtful look at how being different can either alienate or unite people.

The Demon's Lexicon, by Sarah Rees Brennan, McElderry Books, June 2009

Brothers Nick and Alan have been fighting magicians and demons all their lives, one step ahead of the forces intent on killing or exploiting them, all thanks to the magical talisman keeping their insane mother alive. It gets decidedly more complicated when they're approached by a pair of teenagers in need of their help in escaping the certain death of a demon mark. When Alan is marked as well, Nick is forced to go to extraordinary lengths to protect the only person he's ever cared for, in the process discovering their family's deepest, darkest secrets, and confronting his own inner demons. The writing and tone are as sharp as a sword's edge in this darkly exciting adventure, sure to appeal to fans of *Supernatural* or *Buffy*.

Kiss of Life, by Daniel Waters, Disney Hyperion, May 2009

Phoebe Kendall has two men in her life, and they're both dead. Or rather, differently biotic, a polite way of saying zombie. Tommy is the articulate spokesman for the walking dead, while Adam died trying to protect her; she loves them both, but has to make a choice. Meanwhile, anti-zombie sentiments are on

which continues in *Darkest Hour* and *Always Forever*. Pyr is publishing all three books in fast succession, so that by the time you are reading this review, the entire series will be in print; nevertheless, what follows applies to the first volume only.

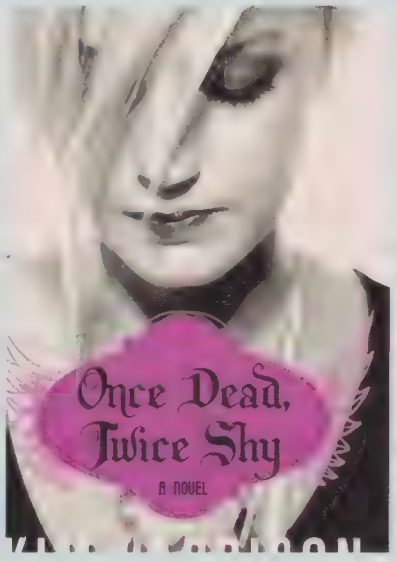
Like van Eekhout, Chadbourn is dressing up old myths in modern style and sensibility, infusing magic back into a contemporary world that is ignorant or scornful of its existence. This is dark urban fantasy, shot through with elements of horror, and has the salutary aim of demonstrating what fragile props science and reason may be when confronted by older, wilder realities. Quite early on, one of Chadbourn's characters, a hippy savant named Tom, taking the Gandalf role, succinctly states the premise of the novel: "The seasons have turned. The Age of Reason has passed. We're on the cusp of a new age."

The pendulum swings back to magic: an old but honorable theme. Unfortunately, Chadbourn tackles it by falling back on cliché. So closely does his plot track to uber-fantasy plots of the sort mocked by Diana Wynne Jones in her classic *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* that it becomes a kind of game to guess what he's going to throw into the mix next. A stone that proclaims the true king? Check. A magic sword? Check. Magic spear? Check. Magic cauldron? Check. How about a quest for all four of these magical Maguffins, by a group of unlikely and unwilling heroes prophesied from ancient times, upon whose shoulders rests the destiny of mankind? Check again. And a Dark Lord, with dark minions, who seeks the end of all that lives? Check. Oh yeah, and dragons. And fairies. Check and mate.

Archeologist Jack Churchill is walking the streets of modern-day London late one night when he interrupts an assault beneath a bridge; what he witnesses is so horrible that he faints, and, upon waking, can remember little of what terrified him. Meanwhile, lawyer Ruth Gallagher has stumbled onto the same assault, with the same result. In the aftermath, the two strangers are drawn together by what they remember… and what they have forgotten. The quest for their missing memories brings them in contact with Tom Learmont, a hippy holdover who warns them of an imminent change in the nature of the rise, prejudice and hate crimes threatening to destroy the fragile peace between the living and the dead. With Phoebe and her friends squarely in the middle, they're about to see what happens when things get out of control. A complex, intelligent allegory for just about any minority population you care to name, this continues the story started in *Generation Dead* and greatly expands the ideas explored there. This is still one of the best new series on the shelves, and I can't wait to see where Waters will take us. Who ever thought a YA zombie love story could be so much fun, or so philosophical?

Once Dead, Twice Shy, by Kim Harrison, HarperCollins, May 2009

Madison Avery dwells in a state between life and death, due to the botched reaping that failed to properly claim her soul, and her own stubborn desire to live. Now, as an apprentice reaper in her own right, she studies under the sexy, frustrating Barnabas, exploring her new powers. What makes her unique as a reaper also makes her a target for a never-ending onslaught of dark forces, though, and her attempts to thwart them will inspire her to achieve a far greater destiny. But is she ready for the consequences? This fast-paced, entertaining tale marks the start of a new series for Harrison, filled with the same blend of action, magic, strong characterization, and dry humor that her fans have come to expect. It'll be interesting to see where she goes with this setting.



Fairy Tale, by Cyn Balog, Delacorte Press, June 2009

Morgan Sparks thought she had her happily ever after with her boyfriend Cam, sharing everything from secrets to birthdays together. That is, until Cam's geeky cousin Pip comes to visit, and everything changes for the stranger. It seems that Cam is really a changeling, a fairy prince sent to our world, while Pip was stolen away in his place. Now, as their sixteenth birthday approaches, Cam and Morgan are about to be separated, forever. As Cam gradually transforms into the fairy he was meant to be, Morgan seeks a way to keep him from leaving her. But will this fairy tale have a happy ending? Balog cleverly deconstructs and repurposes fairy tale tropes in order to tell a new story with familiar nuances. After a while, it's easy to see where she's going with this, proving that, sometimes, the journey is more important than the destination. Definitely a nifty take on the concepts, and a strong debut for the author.

Sea Change, by Aimee Friedman, Scholastic Point, June 2009

Miranda Merchant has no idea what to expect when she and her mother move back to secluded Selkie Island to renovate the old family home for resale. What she finds is a legacy stretching back generations, new friends who draw her into a whirlwind of upper-crust social activities, and a strange affinity for the sea. When she meets Leo, a local boy who stirs the passions within her, Miranda starts to wonder if the stories of Selkie Island being home to shape-shifting seal-people are correct after all… and if she's one of them. Moody, atmospheric,

and romantic, this book subtly infuses an intriguing setting with magical undertones, making for a thought-provoking experience.

Me, My Elf & I, by Heather Swain, Speak, June 2009

Meet Zephyr Addler, the newest student at the Brooklyn Academy of Performing Arts. She's tall, blonde, pretty, and an elf. Her family moved from their secret homeland in Michigan to New York so her father can further his musical career (he's hot on YouTube), but the sheltered Zephyr is in for some major culture shock. Can her new friends, Mercedes and Ari, keep her out of trouble, or will she run afoul of the school's resident diva, Bella Dartagnan? Cue wacky hijinks and cultural misunderstandings as Zephyr learns the ins and outs of being a normal human teenager while keeping her true origins a secret even as she auditions for a spot in a commercial. A pleasant, frothy tale marked with sitcom-level antics, that successfully injects a touch of urban fantasy into the cutthroat world of performing arts schools. ☙

Michael M. Jones, writer and book reviewer, lives in Roanoke, VA, with a herd of cats, a vast mountain of books, and a very patient wife. He's sworn not to die until he's finished reading his backlog of books. His ever-growing archive of reviews can be found at www.michaelmjones.com. ☙

of reality, and Laura DuSantiago, a tough-talking woman with first-hand experience of that change.

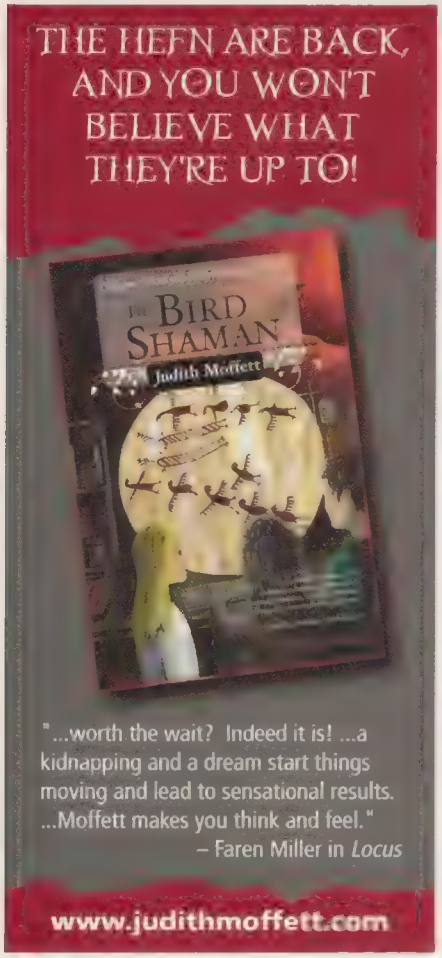
Almost at once, these three young people, and their older guide, find themselves pursued by monstrous beings: a dragon, an immense black dog, and strange creatures very like what they saw beneath the London Bridge. Soon the legendary Wild Hunt joins the pursuit, led by the Erl-King himself.

Luckily, Tom knows how to harness a mysterious blue fire coursing through the ley-lines of England; with this Earth Magic, he can hide them for a while. But not forever. No, their pursuers must be faced and defeated using four magical artifacts imbued with ancient power (see above). These items are hidden and must be found one by one. Or so Jack is told by a faery queen who has visited his dreams from childhood and now gifts him with a lantern whose light will guide them toward the artifacts they need—not the last time important information, and more than just information, will be handed to characters on a silver platter.

Along the way, two others will join their company, for the old prophecies speak of the five Brothers and Sisters of Dragons who alone have the power to defeat the evil Fomorri, also called the Night Walkers, evil beings intent on the destruction of the faery folk known as the Danaan and humanity alike. But the five soon find that they cannot fully trust each other, or their mysterious benefactor, Tom, and each harbors secrets that may cause their fragile company to fall apart in acrimony or outright violence.

Chadbourn's approach to all this is one of high earnestness, as devoid of irony as of poetry, as if he's trying to graft the gravitas of Tolkien onto a postmodern world that is ill-suited for it: but even Tolkien knew there was no going back. There's a grim seriousness to the narrative, a kind of plodding determination to leave no cliché unturned, that leeches suspense away, for it becomes clear that nothing terrible is going to happen—at least, not to the main characters; the body count otherwise is quite high—until certain plot points are hit and certain plot coupons acquired. This has the added effect of straitjacketing the characters, removing their freedom of action—or at any rate the necessary illusion of it—without which, beneath the costuming of quirks and personal histories, they are revealed as mere puppets put through their paces. I couldn't believe in, or care about, any of them.

Jacqueline Carey's new novel, *Naamah's Kiss* (Grand Central Publishing, New York, hardcover, 646 pp., $26.99, ISBN: 978-0-446-19803-5), returns to the alternate history/fantasy Renaissance-era Europe of her two Kushiel trilogies, only set some hundred years later. Those books focused on Terre d'Ange, the stand-in for France, a land settled by the descendants of humans and fallen angels, where the guiding rule is "Love as thou wilt": the command of Elua, a divine figure born from the spilled blood of Yeshua, the Son of God, and the tears of Mary Magdalene. Elua and his companions—angels who chose to "fall" in order to help him spread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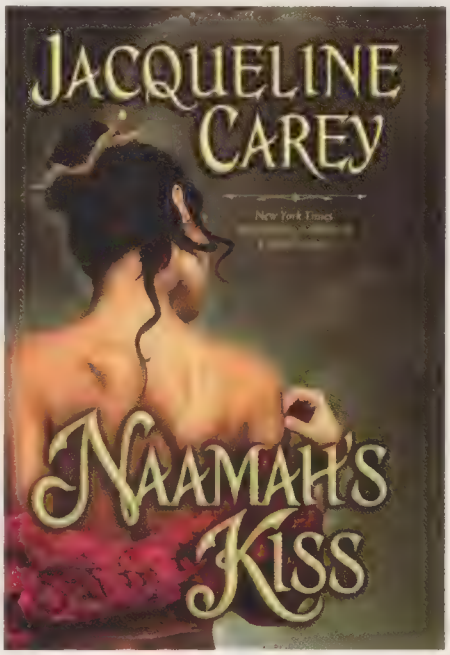
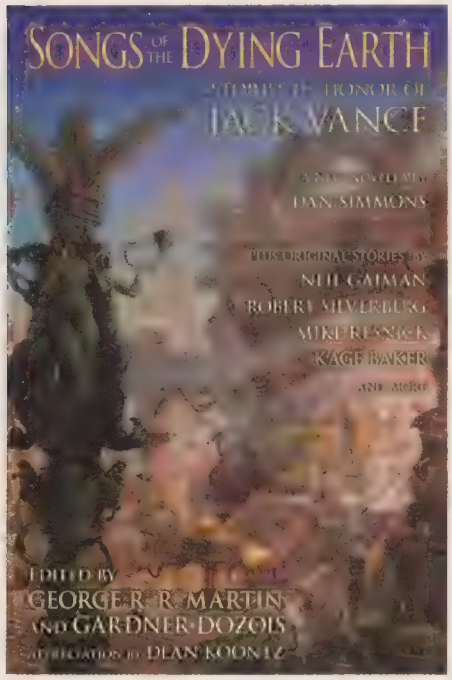


his gospel to humans—have long-since transcended the mortal sphere, but their magical influence remains ubiquitous. The Naamah referenced in the title of this novel was one of these companions, whose domain was and is sexuality, in all its permutations; an Aphrodite-like figure, in other words. This well-thought-out, surprisingly fertile blending of Christian and pagan mythologies is one of the continuing strengths of Carey's work.

Naamah's Kiss opens not in Terre d'Ange but in Alba—England—where a plucky young woman, Moirin, the half-breed daughter of a D'Angeline priest sworn to Naamah and a woman of the Maghuin Dhonn, a tribe of elflike indigenes who worship a primordial bear goddess, learns that her mixed parentage has endowed her with rare magical abilities, including a powerful healing touch, along with a destiny that lies "across the water." With the recent discovery of the New World, exactly which water she must cross to find that destiny—sensible to her through her *diadh-anam*, a kind of soulful spark that acts as a lodestone to point her in the right direction and toward the right people—becomes an important question. But in this novel Moirin heads east, first to her father's country, where, despite or because of her freshness and naiveté—and bodacious bod—she is swept up in decadent court politics, which revolve around the queen, Jehanne, and her lover, Raphael, who dabbles dangerously in black magic.



Because the goddess Naamah has "kissed" Moirin, blessing her with a strong, polymorphously perverse sensuality, the gratification of her sexual desires is very much a part of the enigmatic destiny she pursues—or, rather, not so much the gratification of her desires as the relationships that come about through their gratification: with Raphael, Jehanne, and others high and low in the D'Angeline hierarchy.

Moirin narrates her own story, yet she remains very much a blank slate. Other characters universally succumb to her charms and are changed by knowing her—not only in the Biblical sense—but she herself doesn't change, even as her path leads from the boudoirs and bedrooms of Terre d'Ange to the imperial court of far-off Ch'in. Like a chameleon, she adapts effortlessly to her surroundings but takes little of permanence away.

With no overarching plot beyond the heroine's search for her destiny, *Naamah's Kiss* is a series of episodes strung together with sex scenes—a deftly written series, to be sure. Carey is a talented writer. But it seemed to me that her own *diadh-anam* was sputtering over the course of this book, as if she were taking a detour from her destiny—a destiny that may have begun in Kushiel's world but now lies beyond it. — **Paul Witcover** ☙

Paul Witcover is the author of the novels *Waking Beauty*, *Tumbling After*, and *Dracula: Asylum*, and the collection *Everland*. He is also the author of *Zora Neale Hurston*, a biography. He lives on the edge of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. ☙

***The Magicians*, Lev Grossman, Viking Adult, New York, NY, hardcover, 416 pp., $26.95, ISBN: 978-0670020553**

Brilliant but aimless Brooklyn high schooler Quentin Coldwater receives an invitation to apply for exclusive Brakebills College, a secretive institution devoted to the education of young wizards. Having been obsessed already from an early age with a series of fantasy novels set in a Narnia-like land called Fillory, and unexcited by the privileged but banal future awaiting him, Coldwater eagerly accepts the invitation. The next five years provide not only a rigorous education in the magical arts, but also in the ambiguities and challenges of adult life as well: Quentin falls in love, forms rivalries and friendships with fellow students, and finds himself challenged in ways that he never was in the outside world. Graduation finds the newly-minted magician and his friends living a dissipated, empty life of drugs, casual sex, and nonstop parties partly fueled by Quentin's fear that if magic isn't enough to fill the emptiness in his life then maybe nothing ever will be. All of this changes, though, when an old rival from Brakebills shows up on his doorstep with an unbelievable assertion: Fillory is real, and he's discovered a way for everyone to visit. Quentin and company make the trip, but Fillory turns out to be a far darker place than they expected, and getting home may be a challenge. *The Magicians* is an engaging and worldly story of youth, magic, and loss of innocence — *Harry Potter* by way of Michael Chabon. This is a novel that should not be missed.

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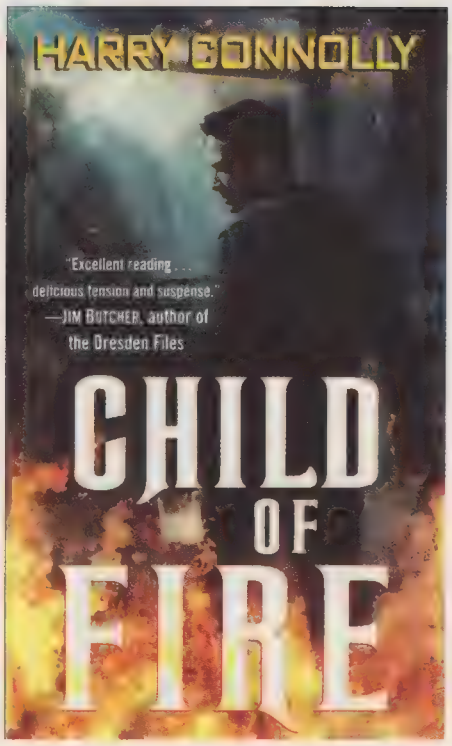
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CHILD OF FIRE

***Songs of the Dying Earth*, edited by George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois, Subterranean, Burton, MI, hardcover, 600 pp., $40.00, ISBN: 978-1596062139**

Jack Vance's long and prolific career has contributed much to speculative literature, with perhaps the most influential of his works being those that comprise the Dying Earth cycle: *The Dying Earth*, *Eyes of the Overworld*, *Cugel's Saga*, and *Rhialto the Marvellous*. Depicting the last days of an Earth where magic and science are indistinguishable, and charlatans and rogues conspire against each other under the feeble glow of a dying sun, these stories have inspired numerous role-playing games (including the hobby's progenitor, *Dungeons & Dragons*) and the works of countless fantasy authors, all of whom have been entranced by Vance's unmistakably baroque prose and droll humor. As widely as Vance's influence has been felt, it is hard to believe that there hasn't been a tribute to his work before now. Happily, editors George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois have seen fit to address this oversight with *Songs of the Dying Earth*, an outstanding new anthology from Subterranean Press. This massive volume features 23 never-before-published stories from some of the genre's biggest names, including Neil Gaiman, Elizabeth Hand, Lucius Shepard, Dan Simmons, Kage Baker, and Robert Silverberg. It must be difficult to write a story that is recognizable as an homage to an author's style without devolving into pastiche, yet largely these tales succeed on their own merits. *Songs of the Dying Earth* is a fitting tribute to Vance's genius that will delight his many fans, especially those who have longed to further explore the possibilities of the author's signature creation.

***Child of Fire*, Harry Connolly, Del Rey, New York, NY, mass market paperback, 368 pp., $7.99, ISBN: 978-0345508898**

Author Harry Connolly's debut novel *Child of Fire* is an engaging mash-up, a fantasy-noir written from the unlikely perspective of a hired goon. Ex-con Ray Lilly doesn't expect to live through the week. He's bound to the service of Annalise Powliss, a powerful sorceress and member of the Twenty Palace Society, a secret organization devoted to tracking down and destroying rogue magicians. Annalise still hasn't forgiven him for a past betrayal, and would just as soon see him dead as alive. When the Society charges Powliss to investigate a string of child murders in a little town called Hammer Bay, Ray figures that it's only a matter of which will get him first: his master, the cops, or the supernatural predator thought to be behind the killings. The investigation is going to be a challenge: the people of Hammer Bay don't exactly greet Ray and Annalise with open arms. For one thing, they don't remember any disappearances. Most of the former parents don't even recall having children, even after watching their sons and daughters burst into flames before their eyes just moments before. For another, Annalise is convinced that the town's founding family is behind the disappearances, and the townsfolk just don't discuss them with nosy outsiders. Time is running out for the children of Hammer Bay, and unless Ray can help Annalise uncover the terrible secret festering in the town, he won't be long for this world either. This supernatural thriller is perfect for fans of Jim Butcher's *The Dresden Files*, or anyone who enjoys rough, two-fisted tales of magic and mayhem.

***Eyes Like Sky and Coal and Moonlight*, Cat Rambo, Paper Golem LLC, Philadelphia, PA, trade paperback, 180 pp., $14.00, ISBN: 978-0979534959**

Cat Rambo's *Eyes Like Sky and Coal and Moonlight* is a treasure trove of sometimes surreal, always entertaining, works of mythopoeic fancy from an author unafraid to wander far afield from convention in service of a good story. Zombie brides, dryads, pirate lovers, and goddesses in disguise are but a few of the fanciful beings to be found in this brief but satisfying collection. Stories like "The Towering Monarch of His Mighty Race," a bittersweet tale about P. T. Barnum's acquisition of his prized attraction, Jumbo the elephant, and "Events at Fort Plentitude," a pioneer-era horror piece, blend historical fact and fantasy with a smooth and seemingly effortless grace. Other stories, such as "I'll Gnaw Your Bones, the Manticore Said", amply demonstrate that Rambo is equally skilled at knitting her stories out of whole cloth. Most of these stories are set in a fantasy seaport called Tabat, an invention of Rambo's own. All of the stories in this collection reflect a certain mythic verisimilitude: this is a writer who understands myth and fable, and draws deeply from both to weave unique but timeless tales of fantasy. This collection is a perfect opportunity for those who have not yet read Rambo's work to discover her, and for her long-time fans to finally have some of her very best work in one place.

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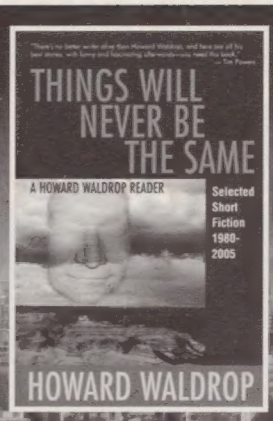

"If Philip K. Dick is our homegrown Borges (as Ursula K. Le Guin once said), then Waldrop is our own very American magic-realist, as imaginative and playful as early Garcia Marquez or, better yet, Italo Calvino." — Michael Dirda, *Washington Post Book World*

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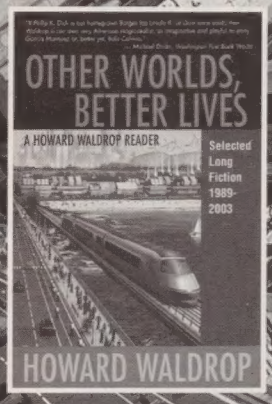

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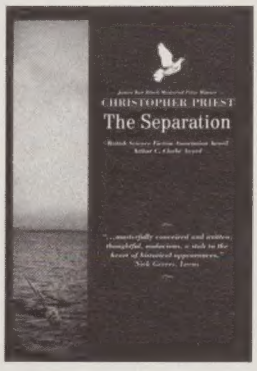

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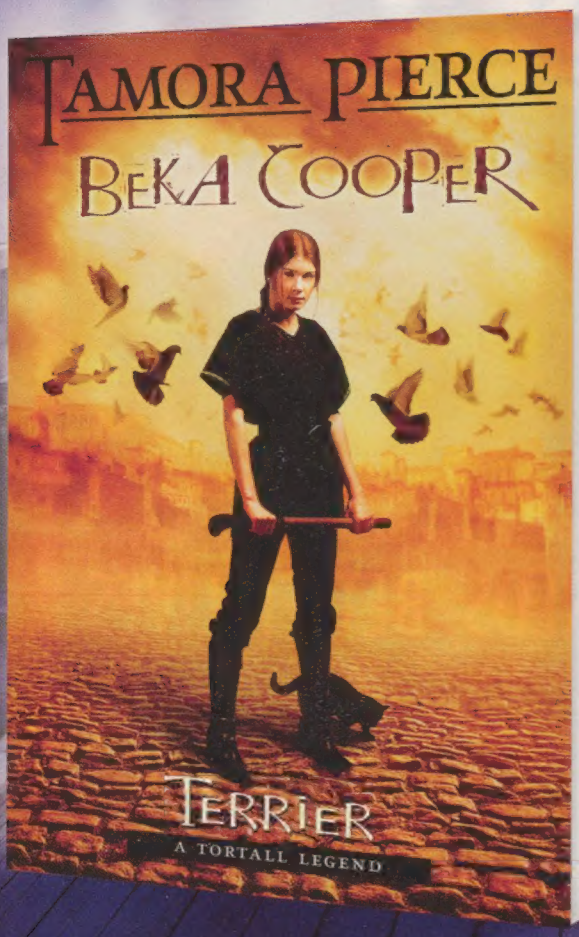

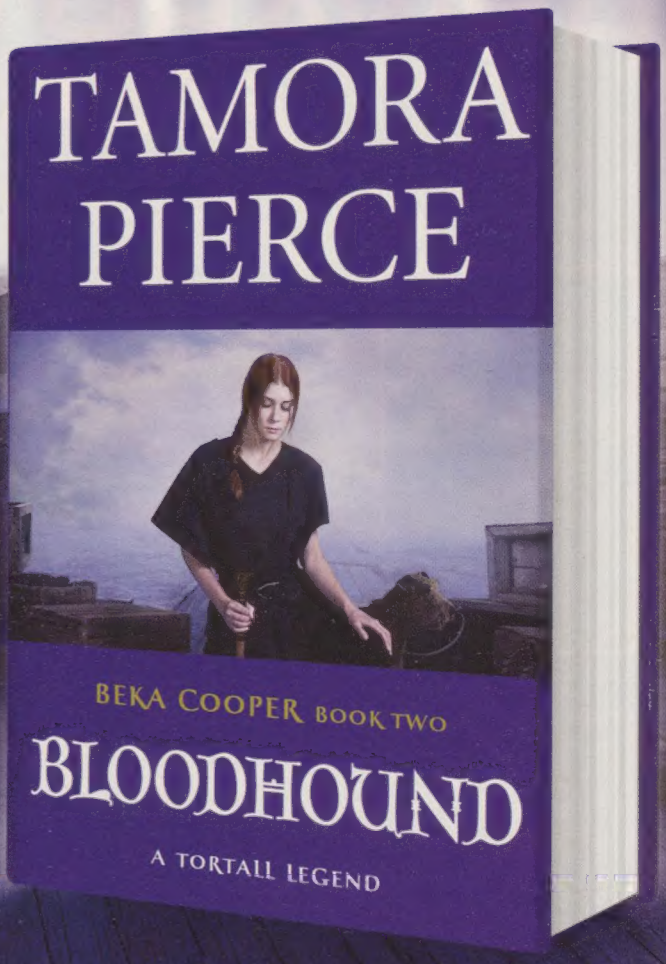

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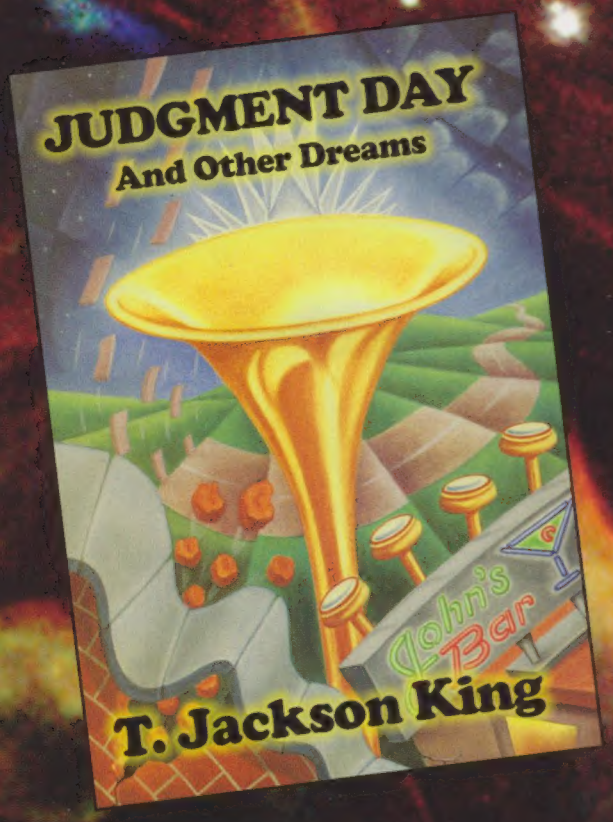

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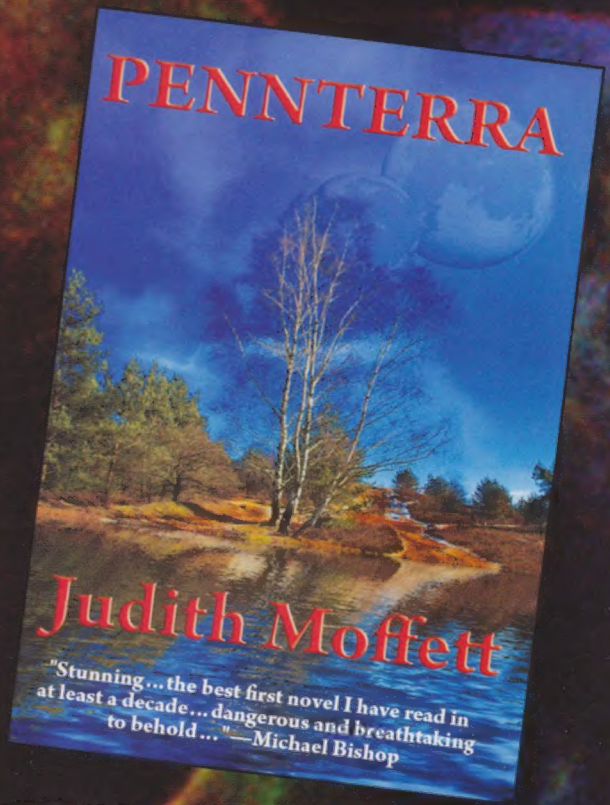
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